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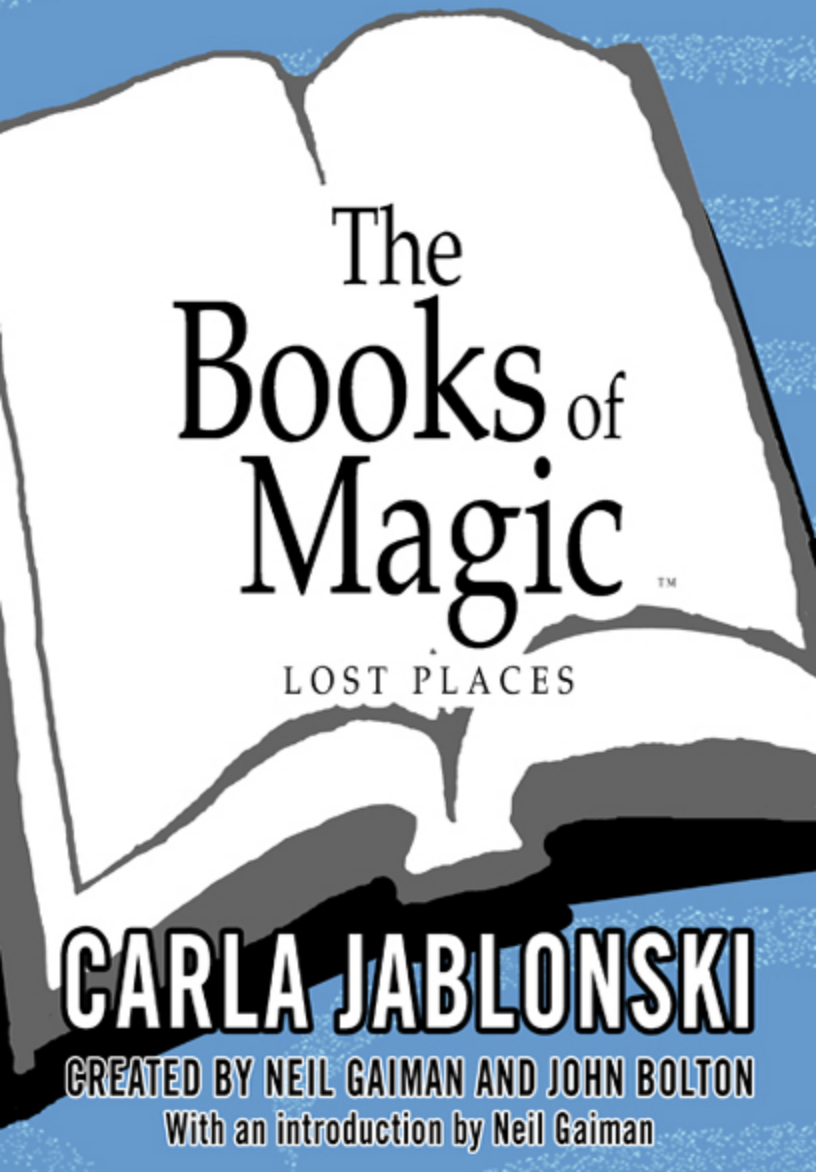

The Books of Magic™

LOST PLACES

CARLA JABLONSKI

CREATED BY NEIL GAIMAN AND JOHN BOLTON

With an introduction by Neil Gaiman

Lost Places

Carla Jablonski

Created by
Neil Gaiman and John Bolton

HarperCollins e-books

For my friend Jack,
an unexpected knight in battered armor.
—CJ

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THE BOOKS OF MAGIC
An Introduction

by Neil Gaiman

WHEN I WAS STILL a teenager, only a few years older than Tim Hunter is in the book you are holding, I decided it was time to write my first novel. It was to be called *Wild Magic*, and it was to be set in a minor British Public School (which is to say, a private school), like the ones from which I had so recently escaped, only a minor British Public School that taught magic. It had a young hero named Richard Grenville, and a pair of wonderful villains who called themselves Mister Croup and Mister Vandemar. It was going to be a mixture of Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* and T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*, and, well, me, I suppose. That was the plan. It seemed to me that learning about magic was the perfect story, and I was sure I could really write convincingly about school.

I wrote about five pages of the book before I realized that I had absolutely no idea what I was

doing, and I stopped. (Later, I learned that most books are actually written by people who have no idea what they are doing, but go on to finish writing the books anyway. I wish I'd known that then.)

Years passed. I got married, and had children of my own, and learned how to finish writing the things I'd started.

Then one day in 1988, the telephone rang.

It was an editor in America named Karen Berger. I had recently started writing a monthly comic called *The Sandman*, which Karen was editing, although no issues had yet been published. Karen had noticed that I combined a sort of trainspotterish knowledge of minor and arcane DC Comics characters with a bizarre facility for organizing them into something more or less coherent. And also, she had an idea.

"Would you write a comic," she asked, "that would be a history of magic in the DC Comics universe, covering the past and the present and the future? Sort of a Who's Who, but with a story? We could call it *The Books of Magic*."

I said, "No, thank you." I pointed out to her how silly an idea it was—a Who's Who and a history and a travel guide that was also a story. "Quite a ridiculous idea," I said, and she apologized for having suggested it.

In bed that night I hovered at the edge of sleep, musing about Karen's call, and what a ridiculous idea it was. I mean . . . a story that would go from the beginning of time . . . to the end of time . . . and have someone meet all these strange people . . . and learn all about magic. . . .

Perhaps it wasn't so ridiculous. . . .

And then I sighed, certain that if I let myself sleep it would all be gone in the morning. I climbed out of bed and crept through the house back to my office, trying not to wake anyone in my hurry to start scribbling down ideas.

A boy. Yes. There had to be a boy. Someone smart and funny, something of an outsider, who would learn that he had the potential to be the greatest magician the world had ever seen—more powerful than Merlin. And four guides, to take him through the past, the present, through other worlds, through the future, serving the same function as the ghosts who accompany Ebenezer Scrooge through Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol.*

I thought for a moment about calling him Richard Grenville, after the hero of my book-I'd-never-written, but that seemed a rather too heroic name (the original Sir Richard Grenville was a sea-captain, adventurer, and explorer, after all). So I called him Tim, possibly because the Monty

Python team had shown that Tim was an unlikely sort of name for an enchanter, or with faint memories of the hero of Margaret Storey's magical children's novel, *Timothy and Two Witches*. I thought perhaps his last name should be Seekings, and it was, in the first outline I sent to Karen—a faint tribute to John Masefield's haunting tale of magic and smugglers, *The Midnight Folk*. But Karen felt this was a bit literal, so he became, in one stroke of the pen, Tim Hunter.

And as Tim Hunter he sat up, blinked, wiped his glasses on his T-shirt, and set off into the world.

(I never actually got to use the minor British Public School that taught only magic in a story, and I suppose now I never will. But I was very pleased when Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar finally showed up in a story about life under London, called *Neverwhere*.)

John Bolton, the first artist to draw Tim, had a son named James who was just the right age and he became John's model for Tim, tousle-haired and bespectacled. And in 1990 the first four volumes of comics that became the first *Books of Magic* graphic novel were published.

Soon enough, it seemed, Tim had a monthly series of comics chronicling his adventures and misadventures, and the slow learning process he

was to undergo, as initially chronicled by author John Ney Reiber, who gave Tim a number of things—most importantly, Molly.

In this new series of novels-without-pictures, Carla Jablonski has set herself a challenging task: not only adapting Tim's stories, but also telling new ones, and through it all illuminating the saga of a young man who might just grow up to be the most powerful magician in the world. If, of course, he manages to live that long. . . .

Neil Gaiman
May 2002

Prologue

London, 2022

THIRTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD Timothy Hunter, the most powerful magical adept of the ages, strolled toward the heavily guarded, massive stone building he called the Formatory. Of course, there were no *visible* guards, but the place was well defended all the same. The protections had been placed by Timothy himself; he'd carved the special runes, chanted the spells in languages long lost, and hung the talismans of great power.

The demon world provides such handy resources when one has something valuable to protect, Timothy mused as he climbed the low marble steps. *They should open their own reference library. I'd even donate some of my millions toward its upkeep. Of course,* he thought with a smile, *all I need to do is cast a spell or make a minor threat, and any information I want is*

mine. Or I can always ask Barbatos—he's usually up on the latest incantations and power spells.

Timothy passed his hand over the gargoyle guardian on the door and felt the prickly shimmer as the gargoyle's expression changed. One minute it bore a menacing, teeth-bared grimace; the next, a friendly, though still grotesque, smile. The door swung open and Timothy stepped inside the cool, silent building.

"Where does the time go?" Timothy muttered, his footsteps echoing loudly as he crossed the shiny marble floor. "It's been weeks since I paid a visit to the Formatory. Shameful to neglect one's dependents that way, really. And I can't even claim I've been too busy to check on them. The war has been shaping up quite nicely on all fronts, with no more than a nudge here or a tickle there from me." He reached the end of the long hallway and placed his hand on the wall padlock. The steel door clanged open.

He hesitated on the threshold. "Be a man, Hunter," he admonished himself. "You thought you were done here, didn't you? You could have sworn you'd finally got her right."

Timothy straightened his tie, pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, and raked his fingers through his short dark hair. He cupped his hand to check his breath, then stepped into

the room. The Molly room.

He stood under the sparkling chandelier in the large circular room and slowly turned, gazing at each of the Mollys. They gazed back from behind their glass walls, separated from one another by thick, soundproof marble barriers. There was Molly as a teenager in jeans, heavy work boots, and black T-shirt. There was a slightly older Molly in an evening gown, a Molly dressed like a biker chick, a Molly in the latest fashion. Molly after Molly after Molly—and not one of them was quite right.

Each Molly moved up to her glass barrier, imploring him silently for . . . what? Attention? Approval? Freedom?

Timothy remained unresponsive to all those pairs of identical brown eyes.

"You thought you were all set to ride off into the sunset with the new-and-improved Molly, didn't you?" Timothy muttered darkly. "Like in some sentimental movie, complete with violins scraping in the background and not a dry eye in the house as the picture fades." He shook his head in disgust. "Jerk."

He slowly paced the circle of Mollys. "You're too romantic for your own good," he scolded himself. "Surely you ought to know by now that these things take time." He stopped in front of a Molly

in a soft, flowered dress with ruffles on the hem. "Speaking of which, how long has this little peach been ripening?"

This Molly's eyes were filled with tears. *She must be awed by my presence*, Timothy surmised. *Unless . . .* He peered at her more closely, and she lowered her eyes. *Unless she was crying before I came into the room. That will never do.* Expressing unhappiness at her situation could not be tolerated. It signified discontent—disapproval.

He pressed the buttons on the pad beside the door. It beeped when he'd completed the sequence, and the glass panel in front of the weeping Molly slid open. The Molly looked startled and took a step back as Timothy moved into her confined area.

"Hello, Molly," he said gently. She seemed a bit skittish and he didn't want to frighten her. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to remind me. How long have you been here?"

The Molly kept her eyes down, and Timothy could see her tremble. A harsh voice behind her answered his question.

"Three years, four months, seven days, and fifteen minutes to be precise."

Timothy's gaze left the Molly and flicked to the wizened old creature coming to stand behind her. Vuall. She was teacher, governess, and prison

guard rolled into one withered husk of a woman. Even taller than Timothy, she had a skull-like face covered in wrinkles, and her steel-gray hair was pulled into a tight bun on top of her head. The only jewelry she wore was long, dangling chains as earrings, and Timothy had never seen her in anything other than the old-fashioned black dress she always wore. Not quite human, not quite demon, Vuall had been around as long as there were girls needing to be kept in check. Girls to be properly trained. She was someone who could enforce all those unspoken rules that made girls fit into the molds created for them, no matter how much the girls resisted.

"Miss O'Reilly. Didn't you hear Timothy ask you a question?" Vuall demanded in a voice that sounded like chalk grating on a blackboard. "Come now, you minx," she admonished the Molly. "Can you tell Master Timothy Hunter in all honesty that you feel yourself worthy to be the object of his devotion?"

"No, miss," the Molly answered in a whisper.

Vuall sniffed disdainfully. "Quite right. Which means we must continue with our lessons. And what are they today?"

The Molly looked slightly perplexed and then responded, "Needlepoint, miss? And piano and French?"

Vuall's eyes narrowed to the size of raisins. "And . . . ?"

"And holding very still, miss? And smiling."

"Very good." Vuall turned to Timothy. "As you can see, she isn't ready yet."

"Yes, yes." Timothy waved a hand. "I'll leave you to your work."

He stepped back out of the chamber. He ignored the pleading eyes of the other Mollys as he left the Molly room and strode out of the Formatory.

She may not be quite there yet, Timothy mused, *but she does seem to be coming along prettily. Vuall should be finished with her soon enough. After that little outburst from the new Molly last night, well, a replacement was certainly called for.*

Yes, the Molly in the flowered dress might do very well. She was a bit younger than the one at home, Timothy observed, closer to the age Molly had been when she . . . well, when *he* had discovered that perhaps she didn't completely share his feelings or his vision and he realized he needed to make improvements.

He shook his head as he walked up the path toward his mansion. *It shouldn't be this difficult.* He felt annoyance rise at the unfairness of it all. *Why is it that the wars I wage seem so much simpler than training a Molly to behave as I wish?*

Timothy flicked his hand at the door, expecting it to open as it always did. Only this time . . . it didn't. He stopped and stared. He tried again. Then again. With a grunt and a great deal of effort, he tried once more, and finally the door responded, flinging itself open. Timothy jogged up the steps, filled with some nameless energy, and stomped into the mansion.

"Have to look into that," he muttered, staring back at the door as it slammed shut behind him. *Why do I have the nagging feeling that the world is running a bit offtrack today?*

"Good morning, sweetheart," a Molly said. She sat precisely where he had left her—perched on the sofa, wearing her pink silk dress and sparkling jewels. "Is—is something the matter?"

I hate that hesitating speech pattern she's developed, Tim thought with fury. "Haven't I told you not to yammer at me while I'm thinking? You can see that I'm thinking, can't you?"

"Oh yes." The Molly's face flushed. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"I'll give you sorry, you stupid cow—if you don't shut your mouth." Timothy strode past her, needing to get away from her.

She is far too docile, Timothy decided. *Except when she isn't! Oh, why can't she be what I want her to be?*

A thought stopped him. *Could it be that I don't know what I want, and that's why I'm having trouble conveying my wishes?*

A cold dread swept through him. "No!" he shouted. "That can't be it! I am Timothy Hunter—and I am in control!" He glanced back and again saw the Molly sitting on the sofa, staring straight ahead, her face blank. Disgust twisted his stomach. *I should return her to the Formatory this instant*, he thought. *Clearly the trouble lies in her, not in me.*

Only . . . A wave of dizziness made the room blur for a moment. Timothy blinked and took several deep, slow breaths, trying to keep the room from spinning. *I can't do it now*, he decided. *I'm not feeling up to it. I must be sick. No, not sick exactly. Just a bit shaky.*

He reached for the table to steady himself—and his hand went right through it! Stunned and unsteady, he stumbled to the floor, knocking over a priceless vase as he went down. But there was no crash or shattered crystal—the vase simply evaporated!

"Wh-what's happening?" he gasped.

He knelt on the ground trying to catch his breath, get his bearings. His stomach tightened as the walls around him flickered as if they were about to blink out.

"Timothy, are you all right? I didn't even see you fall." The Molly reached down to help him up, but Timothy pushed her away.

"Barbatos," Timothy rasped. "I have to find Barbatos. He'll know what's happening. He'll tell me what to do."

The demon Barbatos dropped his tasty fruit-filled treat into the toaster. *Ahhhhh, junk food—one good reason to allow humans to live.*

He rolled his small body over onto his chubby blue belly and gazed at his reflection in the side of the silver toaster, admiring his smooth bald head.

Things have been going rather well, Barbatos thought. *I do like these lush quarters Timothy Hunter has provided for me. He really is quite the needy mage, thankfully. He can't make a move without his most untrustworthy demon servant. Just as I had planned.*

Barbatos dug his fat toes into the thick carpet. *Mmmmm. Plush. Another invention to thank those pesky humans for.*

Wham! The door burst open and hit the opposite wall with a bang. Timothy Hunter stood, breathing hard, in the doorway, sweat beading on his forehead. "Barbatos," Timothy bellowed.

What's he got his knickers in a twist over now? Barbatos wondered. Although Timothy

Hunter's high-strung nature made him blissfully easy to manipulate, it also grew tiresome on occasion.

"Sir Timothy," Barbatos purred, keeping his eye on the toaster. The wretched thing had a terrible tendency to burn his food. "The gears of your clockwork world mesh smoothly today, I trust?"

Barbatos used his most oily, subservient voice—the voice that had persuaded Timothy to allow Barbatos to plan the latest war, while transferring substantial funds from paper currency into far more useful magical energy allotments.

Timothy stalked into the room and stood over Barbatos. He planted his feet wide as if grounding himself. "I adjure thee, O fallen one, in the name which must not be spoken." Timothy intoned. "As thou art in this place and time my servant I charge thee, answer without guile—"

Barbatos sighed and sat up. "Oh, Timothy, spare us the incantations. You know I never lie to you."

With a little click, the toaster treat popped up. Timothy started at the sound and grew pale, then sank down in the corner of the room.

The great mage is more erratic than usual, Barbatos noted. *Excellent*. Barbatos hid a smirk as he stared at the stricken so-called master. *Timothy may have more firepower*, Barbatos thought, *but* I

am the true master here. Still, it wouldn't do to let the magician know that.

"O great master, what is it that is troubling you?" Barbatos asked, as sweetly as syrup.

"Something is going horribly wrong with the world," Timothy moaned. He seemed to be fighting back tears. "It is . . . destabilizing. What's happening to me? To the world?"

Barbatos almost felt a flicker of sympathy; the mage seemed so genuinely lost. Then he smiled. *Ahhhh, confusion—another lovely human condition to exploit. Yes, junk food, soft fabrics, and easily baffled minds. Humans. Gotta love 'em*.

"Perhaps it's something you ate," Barbatos said, taking a bite of the completely chemical and synthetic snack. He smacked his lips. *Delicious!*

Timothy leaped to his feet, no longer weak and sniveling. *He really does suffer from mood swings*, Barbatos observed.

"I touch things, and my hand goes right through them," Timothy snarled, a combination of fear and fury making his body vibrate. "My own mansion keeps disappearing and reappearing. And streets have changed direction, I'm sure of it! You are going to tell me what is happening, demon, and you are going to tell me now."

This time, Barbatos truly listened, and he didn't like what he was hearing. "I was afraid of

this," the demon murmured, his attention diverted from his gummy snack. What Timothy was describing was not good.

"What do you mean—you could have predicted this?" Timothy demanded. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"I was hoping to avoid this problem altogether," Barbatos explained. "You see, sweet master, life is a matter of variables. And *your* life, in particular, is notably more, shall we say, tenuous, at best. Precarious, if you will."

"What are you saying, demon?" Timothy stepped forward and raised his hands as if he were going to cast a spell. "Speak or I shall compel you."

"Oh, hush. Stop exciting yourself," Barbatos snapped. "If you would let me explain. See, mortals"—he tipped his round bald head at Timothy—"like you, find it comforting to think of the past as something definite and the future as inevitable. Stable. Decided. But time is a fluid continuum. What you call past and future are only currents in it. Currents that are constantly changing."

Timothy's eyes narrowed as he considered what Barbatos was saying. "Go on. . . . "

"Imagine that time contains a number of futures, each dependent on what the child who

might become you chooses to do." Barbatos waggled a chubby blue finger at Timothy. "Note I said '*might* become you.'"

"You try my patience," Timothy growled.

"Dear, dear, I see a fuller explanation is in order." Barbatos bit his lip. "An example. Young Timothy Hunter faces a choice: Choose a life of magic or not," the demon declared in the tone of a lecturer. "Once he sets foot onto one path or another, an untold number of possible futures is created. Soon, another choice presents itself to our dear hero. Turn left or turn right?" He held up a hand to silence Timothy's protest. "Yes, my dear pupil, it can be that simple. By turning left, Tim Hunter kills off all those possibilities awaiting him had he turned right. Wiped out in an instant all of those future Tims. One of whom could be you."

Timothy's jaw clenched. "Demon, I think I am going to hurt you for lying to me," he said through gritted teeth, "unless you can prove that you speak the truth."

Barbatos shrugged. "Oh, why not?" He leaned forward so that the little hourglass he always wore around his neck dangled away from his chest. "Touch the hourglass, master," he instructed.

Timothy reached out, then hesitated.

Barbatos noticed the mage's hand shaking.

"Do you think this is a trick?" Barbatos asked. "Well, suit yourself. But who else has ever told you the truth?"

Still, Timothy held his hand inches from the hourglass.

"It's such a fascinating world you've created here," Barbatos commented. "Will it fade away when you cease to be, I wonder? Or will it grind on until its ticky-tocky springs run down?"

With enormous effort, Timothy forced himself to grab the hourglass.

"Ahh, that's the spirit. Doesn't hurt a bit, does it?"

Barbatos knew that as he spoke, the hourglass was showing Timothy all the other Tims he might have been had he made different choices, taken different paths. There was the Tim who lived in Faerie, a magical kingdom. There was the Tim who died fighting some low-level demon and was buried in an unmarked grave. Tims and more Tims, each unique, each possible at some point in tricky time. Each had the potential to survive instead of the Tim who grew up to sit before a tiny blue demon with an hourglass on a chain.

With a cry, Timothy wrenched his fingers from the hourglass and fell to the floor, moaning. The bombardment of possible Tims must have

been overwhelming, Barbatos assumed. That and the knowledge that one of those selves might very well replace this Timothy forever.

"Obviously, something in the past has changed the present, Timothy. But time still holds the child who could become you," Barbatos assured the stricken mage.

"We need to make sure that happens!" Timothy cried. "Make the past behave, demon. Make sure I exist just as I am now!"

Barbatos smiled, his large white teeth gleaming against his blue skin. "I know exactly how to do that, master."

"Then do it!" Timothy stood back up and tugged at the ends of his jacket. He regained his composure. "And do it now!" He stormed out, slamming the door.

"Confound it!" Barbatos swore, pacing his chamber. "It's that Molly O'Reilly, I'm sure of it. She must have grown even closer to the boy."

His round, lidless eyes squinted as he thought about what he should do. "We must separate them—permanently."

He lay down on his enormous bed and gazed at the ceiling, tapping the tips of his fingers together, thinking. *No point in telling Sir Timothy about this,* he decided. *He's so Molly obsessed, he'd never believe that getting rid of her is the only way to*

ensure his existence in this form.

He lifted a glass of sherry from the night table. "And this ragged, desperate, corrupted form is the Timothy Hunter I like best."

The door opened again, and Timothy Hunter slumped in. "I—I can't go out there," he rasped. "It doesn't feel right. It's too . . . unstable." He sank to the floor, huddling in the corner.

Barbatos smiled. "You stay right here, master," the demon soothed. "And let Barbatos take care of everything."

Chapter One

Present Day London

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD TIM Hunter sat on the stoop of the Swan Dance School, enjoying the early spring day. Winter was definitely over, and although his neighborhood tended to stay gray in even the best weather, well, he just didn't care. He was in too good a mood.

"Careful there, Hunter," Tim scolded himself. "You nearly started whistling. No one would recognize you in this unusually cheerful state."

He stretched out his legs and leaned his elbows on the step behind him. He had good reason to be a mite cheerier these days. No matter that his whole life had been turned upside down ever since those wacky blokes he called the Trenchcoat Brigade had popped into his life and let him in on one big whopping secret: He had the

potential to become a powerful magician. *Big deal*.

That was nothing compared to finding out that the man he grew up with wasn't really his father and that his real dad, now dead, lived in another world and could turn himself into a falcon at will. *So what?*

And just because he'd faced Death—actually met her in person—and been chased, attacked, and nearly killed more times than any other thirteen-year-old boy that he knew, well, just another day in the life. Tim still felt as if he could start whistling or bursting into song like they did in the movies his father—er, Mr. Hunter, that is—enjoyed on the telly.

And all because of Molly. Molly O'Reilly. "My girlfriend," Tim declared, testing out the words. It was new, this boyfriend-girlfriend thing, and he was still getting used to it. So far, he liked it—liked it a lot. Most important, he now had someone he could share all of his bizarre experiences with, someone he could trust. Someone . . .

"For heaven's sake, Tim, you are taking up a lot of space," a familiar voice behind him observed. "How are we supposed to get down the stairs?"

Tim tipped back his head and gazed at Molly. She stood above him, hands on her hips, thick dark hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, brown

eyes sparkling. Beside her stood their friend Marya, a girl Tim had met when he had saved her world, Free Country, and encountered again after she had decided to stay permanently in London.

Marya grinned. "Maybe we should try to *jeté* over him."

Molly hooted. "Be my guest," she told Marya. "You're a lot better than I am at *jetés*. I don't think I'd clear him."

Tim scrambled over to the side of the stairs. "Take all the space you need. I don't want to get caught in the face by your feet. I've heard all about toe shoes."

The girls laughed. "You're right to be scared," Molly said, dropping down beside Tim on the step. "Those toe shoes are really hard! I don't know how you can wear them," she said to Marya.

Marya leaned against the railing, her long red hair blowing slightly in the breeze. "You get used to them, I guess," she said. "And they make pirouettes so beautiful!" She bounded down to the sidewalk and did a few turns in her sneakers. She made a face at her feet. "You see? Sneakers are no good at all for spinning!"

Tall and slim, Marya was a year older than Tim and Molly, but in some ways she seemed quite a bit younger. Tim knew that was because she'd spent so much time in Free Country. She had left

his world long before he'd been born, so everything here was brand-new to her. She and Molly had become close friends ever since they'd met at the Swan Dance School, where they both took classes.

Marya grabbed her knapsack from where she had plopped it on the sidewalk. "Gotta go. Annie is going to take me to the ballet tonight, and I promised I'd help her at the café so she could leave early!"

Annie was the cool waitress who had taken Marya in when the girl had decided to stay in this world rather than return to Free Country. She had helped Marya find Tim in the first place.

"Have fun!" Molly called as Marya took off at a run.

"I had an idea of something we could do this afternoon," Tim said as Marya disappeared around the corner.

"What's that? And don't say I get to watch you skate-board." Molly pretended to yawn. "Because that would be sooo boring."

"No, I think this is something even *you* will find interesting," Tim said, getting to his feet. He slung his backpack over one shoulder. "I thought we'd go on a picnic. I've got some people I'd like you to meet. Only they aren't exactly people."

Molly jumped up. She glanced around to

make sure no one was nearby who might overhear them. "Magic-type people?"

"Exactly." Tim grinned. "It's time I gave you a minitour of my magical life."

"Awesome!"

They strolled along the pavement. "So where are we having our picnic?" Molly asked.

"You'll see," Tim said.

Molly rolled her eyes. "Okay, Hunter, don't think that just because you're some kind of magical big shot that you can get away with acting all mysterious."

"I'm not," Tim protested. "It's just that if I tell you, it's going to sound dumb, and I promise you that it isn't."

"I'll be the judge of that!" Molly declared with a grin.

Tim grinned back. "This way."

Molly gave him a sidelong glance as they waited for the light to change. "How does it feel to do . . . to *be* magic?"

Tim thought hard about her question. "Mostly confusing," he admitted. "Half the time I don't know what I'm doing, or what I'm expected to be doing, or if I'm supposed to be doing anything at all. But it's also amazing. Especially when I manage to make something happen the way I want to—when I perform the magic on purpose

instead of by accident."

He shook his head, knowing he could never find the exact words to even come close to explaining the energy surge, the connection to intense forces, and the clarity and concentration that magic required. "It's powerful," was what he finally came up with. "Scary and exciting, and exhilarating."

Molly nodded thoughtfully. "Do you use, I don't know, *tools*? Like a magic wand or something?"

"Not really. But I do have something that I think has magical properties." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a smooth stone. "Tamlin, my real father, gave this to me," he said, showing it to Molly. "It's called an Opening Stone. I think it opens doors to other worlds."

"Wow. It keeps changing color," Molly commented.

"Yeah, I'm not sure why it does that." Tim stuck it back in his pocket. "I still have a lot to learn about magic."

"From what I've seen, you've done pretty well in this self-taught crash course of yours."

As he thought about what Molly said, Tim realized it was kind of true. *I really have come far in a short amount of time. It's like I've been living in fast-forward.* He grinned broadly. *And it's cool to*

think I can be a magical tour guide for Molly, instead of the trespasser I normally feel like.

"What was the first magic you ever did?" Molly asked.

"You'll laugh," Tim replied. "I turned my yo-yo into an owl." He sighed. "I miss him. He saved my life."

As they rounded a corner Tim realized they were passing the cemetery. "Hang on. Let's duck in here. There's something I want to check out."

Molly looked slightly nervous. "Don't tell me. You're going to talk to ghosts and make dead people rise out of their graves?"

"Nothing that gruesome, I promise." He took her hand and pulled her along the pathway until they arrived at his mother's grave. They stood together silently for a moment.

"There's something growing here," Molly observed.

"I planted them," Tim murmured, gazing at the pale green shoots that now stood a foot high. "They've grown since the last time I was here."

"What are they?" Molly asked.

Tim shrugged. "I don't know. Death gave them to me."

Molly's eyes widened. "Huh?"

Tim stepped forward and peered at the plants. "They've got little buds on them. I wonder

what they're going to be."

"Did you say 'Death'?"

Tim glanced at Molly. "Why don't I tell you that story later," he said.

"Fine by me," Molly said. "The whole death thing gives me the shivers."

Tim gazed at his mother's headstone and remembered the latest shock he'd experienced—the one about his mother's identity. "Do you think she was telling the truth?" he asked Molly softly.

"No."

Tim smiled. He didn't even have to tell Molly what he was talking about, or who. She knew he meant Titania, the Queen of Faerie, who had recently claimed that *she* was Tim's real mother. And she was none too happy about it. Neither was Tim, come to think of it.

"I don't trust that green queen," Molly added. "I don't know why she'd lie, but from what I saw, she might do it just to mess with you."

"Possible." Tim nodded. "She was mad at me for so many things."

"Maybe she wants to mess with your mind because you're so powerful," Molly suggested. "You know, the way athletes try to psych out their best opponents before a big game."

"Could be."

"I'd steer clear of her, if I was you," Molly

warned. "She's got one nasty temper."

"I'll do my best," Tim said. "I certainly have no plans to visit Faerie anytime soon."

Molly continued to stare at the green shoots. "Weird that life can come from death," she said finally.

Tim nodded. "Yeah, Death is kind of like that. She's really different from what you would think."

"*She?*" Then Molly shook her head. "Another time, okay?"

"Deal."

Molly gazed around the cemetery. "So was this where you wanted us to have our picnic? I thought you were going to introduce me to someone. It's not a dead person, is it?"

Tim laughed. "Nope. Very far from it. Let's go."

They wandered along the quiet pathway leading out of the cemetery. As they reached the exit, Tim felt his throat tighten a bit with emotion.

"You know, it's really great for me to be able to talk to you about this stuff," Tim said. "I hated having secrets from you."

Molly gave him a quick sideways glance. "I knew about it, you know," Molly confessed. "Oh, not what the secret was but that you had one."

"Really?" Tim asked. "How?"

Molly shrugged. "My grandma used to tell me

I was fey. Now, most people would consider that another word for crazy, and there's certainly O'Reillys who are mad as loons. But Granny always said it meant that I was sensitive to things. I knew something was up. I never asked because I figured you would tell me when you were ready."

"Thanks for that," Tim said.

"Besides," Molly added, poking him in the side, "I knew if I wanted to I could just arm wrestle the secret out of you."

"Then I doubly appreciate your patience. I'd like to keep some of my dignity intact!"

Soon they arrived at their destination: the abandoned lot where Tim had spent so much time when he was a little kid. Not too long ago he had discovered some formerly imaginary childhood chums were still living in the litter-strewn, weed-filled plot.

"Here we are," Tim announced, gesturing broadly at the lot. "This is where we're having our picnic."

He took Molly's hand and pulled her into the tall grass. He watched as her face changed, as she saw what Tim saw—that the lot had grown in all directions and now had all kinds of surprising things dotting its landscape: ancient monuments, tire swings, fruit-laden bushes, colorful paper

lanterns swinging from trees. None of them truly belonged together, but here in the lot they created a kind of harmony and logic.

"Ohhh," Molly murmured. "You didn't say there was a whole world in here. Is this because of the Opening Stone?"

"Could be. I hadn't thought of that." Tim squeezed her hand. "See, I clearly need your help. I'm useless without you."

"Is this where the unicorn came from?" Molly asked. While Tim and Molly and Marya were in the midst of their last magical adventure, a unicorn had appeared. It had made quite an impression on Molly.

"No, I'm pretty sure that was a unicorn from Faerie," Tim told her. "But there could be a unicorn in here somewhere. If I believed in unicorns as a kid, there would be. I don't remember."

Molly stood still and gaped at Tim. "You mean all this is here because you believed in it when you were little?"

"I think so. That's what everybody keeps telling me."

"Everybody?" Molly repeated.

"Well, everybody I made up when I was a kid," Tim explained. "You met Awn the Blink, the bloke with all the tools who helped get me out of the sewers."

Molly nodded, remembering. That was the same day she had met the unicorn.

"And the narls say so, too."

"The whats?" Molly asked.

"The people I want you to meet. They were my imaginary friends when I was small."

"I never had any imaginary friends," Molly said.

Tim snorted. "Then you must have been one of those kids who had *actual* friends!"

They crossed the meadow toward a large oak tree. A few feet from the oak, Tim knelt down and motioned for Molly to do the same. "We need to approach them slowly," he instructed. "They're a little shy. They live in that tree."

They dropped their backpacks and then crawled through the high grass toward the tree. A few feet away from the trunk, Tim stopped. He had spotted the little twiglike creatures, concentrating hard on some task, seated just in front of the tree. He put his finger to his lips, and Molly nodded, letting him know she understood that they should be quiet.

Tim leaned on his elbows, watched, and listened.

"Piffle!" Tim heard the little narl named Crimple exclaim. "Is it down, out, and around? Or down, out, and in?" He sighed in frustration and

stared at the strands of grass he held. Tim could see that some of the green fronds had been woven together.

"How do birds manage to do this, Tanger?" Crimple complained. "They don't even have thumbs."

"Birds are *born* with wings, Crimple," Tanger explained patiently. "They don't have to make them."

"No!" Crimple's eyes widened in astonishment.

Tanger nodded his head sharply several times. "It's true, true, quite true. They have wings before they have feathers."

"Dogfroth!" Crimple's tiny shoulders sagged. "I suppose it's butterfly wings for me then."

"Only *caterpillars* get butterfly wings, Crimple."

"But I don't want to be a caterpillar!" Crimple protested. "Two legs are quite enough for me, thank you!"

"Quite enough for me, too!" Tim declared.

"And me!" Molly chimed in, giggling.

The two little sticklike creatures started. Tanger's head whipped back so suddenly to stare up at Tim and Molly that his tiny spectacles fell off. Crimple took one openmouthed look at the two friends looming over him, then dropped the

unfinished grass wings and dashed into the hole at the base of the tree.

"Crimple!" Tanger called after the narl. He fumbled in the grass for his specs, then put them back on, hooking the flexible wire frames around his large, pointed ears. He shook his head. "Don't know what's come over that twigling," he told Tim apologetically.

"We didn't mean to scare him," Tim said.

"Think nothing of it," Tanger said. "The Opener is always welcome, you know that. And so does he. I'll see what I can do." He stroked his long pointy nose a few times and then followed Crimple into the tree. Tim could hear him trying to reason with the nervous narl.

"I won't go out. Make my excuses," Crimple said.

"Now, Crimple . . ."

"Tell them I'm not feeling very leafy today."

"Crimple, don't be a stick-in-the-mud."

"I wish I *was* a perishing stick," Crimple muttered.

"We can do without that kind of talk. Besides, it's the Opener himself!"

"Yes," Crimple hissed. "But who's he got with him?"

Tim and Molly exchanged a look. Tim shrugged. "I told you they were shy," he said,

hoping Molly wouldn't feel slighted by Crimple's reaction to her. It had never occurred to him that anyone might not welcome Molly instantly.

She looked worried. "Should I leave?"

"No! No, I'm sure Tanger will work it all out," Tim reassured her.

"If you're positive . . ." Molly said uncertainly.

"I am." He motioned to her to be quiet.

"The Opener is the only one who's supposed to see us," Crimple declared. "That's the rule, isn't it?"

"Hmm. That is true." Tim heard Tanger take a long pause.

The narl must be trying to figure out how all this works, Tim reasoned. *Good luck to him! I'm the so-called Opener, and even I don't understand it!*

"But it was the Opener who ordained the rules, you know," Tanger said finally. "Therefore, it stands to reason that if he wishes to alter it, why—"

"Fizzle!" Crimple cut off Tanger. "I'm not going out there and that's final."

Tanger let out a long sigh. "Very well, twigling. Suit yourself."

Tanger reappeared outside the hollow in the base of the trunk. He gave a small bow to Tim. "Good morning, your Openership." He bowed to Molly. "And good morning to you, too, miss." He

squinted at her. "Assuming you can see me, of course."

"I certainly can, and quite pleased to do so," Molly replied. "It is a true honor."

"For me as well."

Tim grinned. If bark could blush, Tanger's cheeks would be red. He seemed quite smitten. And it was clear to Tim that Molly was equally charmed by the little narl.

"My apologies for Crimple," Tanger said. He shook his head. "He can have some awfully persistent notions."

"I have an idea." Molly smiled. She crawled closer to the tree trunk. She knocked twice on the bark, then said, "Crimple, would you come out, sir, please? Tim and I would like to make wings for you, and we need your help!"

The short branches on Crimple's head emerged from the hole in the tree. The rest of him quickly followed. "Wings, you say?" He stepped out in front of Molly. "If you truly need my help, I'll be most happy to oblige."

"Excellent!" Molly picked up some leaves and held them up to Crimple, checking them for size. Tim did the same for Tanger. They began twisting the stems together.

"So what else is out there in this place?" Molly asked as she fashioned a leaf wing before

Crimple's adoring eyes. He had a big smile on his face. Tim admired Molly's clever way of smoothing things over with the nervous creature.

"I don't know," Tim admitted. "This is as far as I've gone."

"Are you serious?" Molly gaped at him. "Why?"

"Why am I serious or why haven't I gotten myself lost out there?"

"Truly, Molly, miss," Tanger said. He took a sip of rainwater he had collected in an acorn cap. "The Opener is right. Why should he venture farther than our tree? Our lovely meadow. It's nice and picnickery here."

Crimple shuddered. "There's no telling what might be out there."

"This is absurd." Molly put down her half-made wings and stood up. "I'm taking a look around."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Tim argued. He reached for his backpack and pulled out a sandwich. "Like Crimple says, we don't know what's lurking out there."

"Hey, no boyfriend of mine is going to see me as a weak and helpless female." Molly waggled a finger at Tim. "You'd better not get all protective and overbearing or you'll be in a load of trouble."

"All right, all right," Tim said with a laugh.

He flopped onto his back and watched her go.

Molly set off through the tall grasses. *How much trouble could she really find in a place I made up as a kid?* Tim thought, taking a bite of his sandwich and enjoying the spring sunshine. *She should be fine.* Besides, he knew Molly would get quite mad if he objected any further. The day was just too nice for any more arguing.

"You'd better go after her, your Openership," Tanger said. "She could meet someone she hasn't been introduced to."

"She's pretty good at introducing herself," Tim assured Tanger. "That's how I met her."

Tanger put his acorn cup down on the root beside him. "I'm afraid you don't understand, Opener."

"Oh, sazzle it!" Crimple exclaimed. "You stump heads can sit there and talk. I'm going after her." Crimple raced across the meadow and disappeared into the tall grass.

Tanger gasped. "He left the tree!"

Tim glanced at Tanger. The narl looked horrified. "Uh, is he overreacting, or is Molly really in potential trouble?"

It was as if the little narl hadn't heard him. He seemed too stunned by Crimple's departure. "He's left the meadow. I can't believe it."

Tanger's fear was palpable, and now Tim was worried. He got to his feet. "Come on, we don't want to lose them," he said.

"No," Tanger said. "No, we don't."

"Do you want me to carry you? My legs are a lot longer."

"I'm heavier than you think," Tanger said.

Tim looked down at the six-inch twiglike man and suppressed a smile. "I'll manage."

He knelt down and let the spiky little creature climb up onto his shoulder.

"Set?" Tim asked.

"I suppose I must be."

Tim carefully stood up again, and Tanger clutched the collar of Tim's sweatshirt to hold himself steady.

"What were you saying about Crimple?" Tim asked as he trotted across the meadow. They soon slipped into the overgrown, grassy section where they had last seen Molly and Crimple.

"Just that he'd left the tree and the meadow."

"He doesn't do that often, then?"

"No. Not many narls do."

"But aren't you bored, staying in the same place all the time?"

"Oh yes, your Openership. Bored as trivets. It was never a very exciting meadow, once you

stopped coming 'round. I've often wished we could leave it. Without dying, that is."

Tim stopped in midstep and gulped. "Dying?" he repeated. Had he heard Tanger correctly? Were the two narls in even greater danger than Molly?

Chapter Two

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN? You *die* if you leave the tree?" Tim asked Tanger. The idea had never occurred to him. "How?"

"I couldn't say exactly, your Openership," Tanger replied, shifting nervously on Tim's shoulder. "I've never died before, you see, so I'm a bit vague on the details. But that's enough of that. Let's concentrate on finding Crimple and Molly."

"Tanger, are you daft? If your life is in danger, you can't come with me to find Molly." He gripped Tanger's ankles as tightly as he could without snapping them or getting splinters. "Hold on tight, I'm going to run you right back to the tree."

"Going back isn't going to change anything," Tanger said. "I've left my place, and there's no undoing that."

This was all too confusing to Tim. "Get down, Tanger. We need to talk about this."

"Very well, Opener, if you insist. But let's not dawdle, eh? Our friends are lost enough as it is."

Tim knelt down. "Come on, hop off." He winced as the twiglike creature poked and scratched him clambering back to the ground. "Now, what's all this *place* business?"

"Don't they have places where you come from?" Tanger asked.

"Where I come from *is* a place, so far as I know. But you won't catch me dying because I've left it."

"Hmm. That sounds a bit implausible, if you'll forgive my saying so. Perhaps your folk don't call their places 'places'?"

"I'm trying to understand," Tim said. "I really am. But this still doesn't make sense to me."

"What do your folk call it when you have to do certain things to convince your world that you belong in it?"

Tim's eyebrows rose behind his glasses. "I don't think there is such a word. Or such a thing, for that matter. Not where I live, anyway."

Tanger stared at Tim. "Don't your people have rules?" he asked, clearly perplexed. "Rules you all know but never talk about? Keep them and you're welcome as rain, anywhere. Break them, though, and decent folks wouldn't mulch with you if their roots depended on it. Even water runs away from you."

"Ohhh, I see." Tim nodded as he began to understand. "We call that being snubbed. Listen, I can see how it might upset you to be ostracized like that—but aren't you taking it a bit too hard? I mean, you're not going to die of it, surely."

Tanger shook his head. "Well, if you're not the most unfortunate Opener I've ever known, I'm a saucepan. Imagine having ears that size and not knowing how to use them!"

Tim tried not to laugh. He knew Tanger was trying to explain something very important—life-threatening danger, in fact—but to see the little twiglike figure in such fury was, well, kind of cute.

"Okay, let me try to figure this out," he said to Tanger. "You're saying, unless you do these things you always do—these *habits*, say, or ways of living—then the world itself doesn't recognize you as one of its own."

Tanger clapped his small hands. "That's it!"

Tim could say the words, but it still didn't make much sense to him, so he kept trying to work it out. "So these actions, or ways of being, kind of determine who you are?"

"Yes, indeed, Opener! You're coming 'round, I see!"

Tim thought about the way he had felt when he had visited other worlds, like Faerie and Free

Country. Tanger was right—one of the ways he was recognized as an outsider, and one of the reasons he felt so strange in those places, was because there were all these ways of behaving and beliefs and practices that he didn't know anything about. All the Fair Folk knew how to live in Faerie; they were born knowing. Even within his own world, if Tim were to visit Buckingham Palace, for instance, he would certainly feel like he had left his place. He'd be far from the world he knew.

"I think I get it now," Tim said. "And because you've left your place, you've mixed things up. Your reality has changed."

"Precisely." Tanger nodded.

"And by changing your reality so drastically, you think you might cease to exist altogether."

"Yes," Tanger said, his face brightening. Then, as if the implications of what Tim had just said became clear, his eyes were downcast again. "Yes," he said softly.

That's just how I felt when I discovered I was magic. But things are different now. I learned—no, Tim corrected himself—*I'm* learning *how to navigate this new world, the world in which I am magic. But it disrupted my place, and by doing so, in a sense the old Tim Hunter died. Maybe it would it be like that for Tanger*, Tim told himself. *Maybe this wouldn't be*

a real death but some kind of symbolic death.

But there was no way for Tim to be sure. What should they do? What was the right thing?

Tanger stared down at the ground, silent. Tim placed his hands on his hips, thinking. *If leaving the tree really might kill Tanger and Crimple, it is probably too late to change that. So we might as well go forward—and hope that the narl is wrong.*

"Listen," Tim said finally. "Hop back up. If you're right about this, there is nothing we can do about it now. So we might as well try to find Molly and Crimple. After that, we'll see about you and Crimple returning to your 'place.'"

"Yes, Opener," Tanger said. But Tim didn't need to use magic to understand that Tanger didn't really hold out much hope for surviving this adventure.

Chapter Three

"Molly? Miss?" Crimple the narl called after the human girl who had arrived with the Opener. He was having trouble keeping up with her long-legged strides. Being only six inches tall, his legs were a good deal shorter. But he did have the advantage of scooting nicely under branches and through brambles without much effort. Molly had to crash her way through the brush like a great brute.

"Oh, Molly, do stop!" he shouted. "Why don't we go back to the tree and finish my wings?"

He realized he could no longer see her. She had gotten too far ahead of him. "Oh, dear, oh, dear." He sat down and leaned against a root, catching his breath. He hadn't run that far that fast in quite some time. Why would he? What would he go chasing after around his tree?

Crimple sat bolt upright. "The tree!" he

gasped. "I left the *tree*!" He leaped back up to his small feet and paced. "Oh, my goodness gracious. Spittle spattle. Mercy me! I'm out of place!"

He walked in a circle so quickly that he felt quite dizzy and plunked back down to the grass. "I was so worried about Miss Molly that I left the hill. I didn't even think. I just went. I've never done anything brave and brainless before. I didn't know I had it in me."

He tugged at the grass nervously. *What will happen first?* he wondered. *Will it be gradual? Will I wilt and wither or just keel over?* He stared at the fistful of grass he now held, perplexed as to how it got there. He opened his fingers and let the blades fall, then wiped his damp hands on his barklike torso.

Poor Tanger. He'll be all alone. How ever will he get along without me? Who will find his little specs when they're lost? He blinked back tears. "I should have left a note reminding him that his eyeglasses can usually be found atop his pointy head." Crimple's small shoulders sagged. "Oh, mercy, mercy me," he whimpered.

A few yards up ahead, Molly O'Reilly stood in a clearing ringed by tall, leafy trees. The foliage was so dense it blocked the warm sunshine, and she shivered.

"You're right, Crimple," she said. "It *is* kind of spooky in here."

When she received no answer she scanned the area. "Crimple?" she called. *Maybe he freaked and went back to the others*, she reasoned. *I hope the little guy didn't get lost.* She shivered again. *I hope* I *didn't get lost.*

Get over it, girl, she scolded herself. *You've been in thicker woods before when visiting Granny.* Of course, she realized, those woods weren't magical.

Magic. She shook her head. She couldn't get used to it. Tim Hunter, a boy she'd known most of her life, had turned out to be an incredibly powerful magician. It was hard to process. *Amazing. If the other kids knew, they'd certainly stop picking on him at recess.*

I wonder what it will mean to have a magical boyfriend, Molly mused as she started exploring the woods again. If it was like meeting the unicorn, she'd definitely like it. If it was more like meeting Titania, Tim's self-proclaimed mother, she might not. *Still, nobody's perfect*, she reminded herself. *Just look at my own family. The ones who aren't in jail are slightly mad. And the ones who are "normal," well, they end up on the dole or living in places like Ravenknoll Estates, without hope, without dreams, without . . .*

"Hey, what's that?" Molly's train of thought was interrupted by an extremely surprising sight.

"Are those Lacey dolls?" Sure enough, dozens of the popular ten-inch plastic dolls stood posed throughout the little clearing she'd come to. Molly knelt down and picked up a doll with long blond hair and a skimpy swimsuit. A miniature surfboard was glued under one arm.

"Surfer Lacey, I'd recognize you anywhere," Molly said to the doll. "But you are pretty far from the ocean."

She glanced around at the dozens of dolls in different outfits. "I'd say you're all out of place." She stood back up and put her hands on her hips. "Weird. This is supposed to be Tim's sanctuary from when he was a kid. But I can't believe he ever played with Lacey dolls."

She bent down and picked up another doll. This one wore a short gold-lamé halter dress. Molly dangled it from her hand as if it were dangerous. "Sheesh. Look at her. Who has a figure like that in the real world? Who'd want it? She's a totally out-of-proportion freak." She rolled her eyes in disgust. "They should call you Ghastly, not Lacey," she added, dropping the doll.

She strolled around the clearing, gazing at the dolls, smirking. "Tim and I have got to have a talk about this. I bet he blushes red like I've never

seen." As Molly came full circle around the clearing she spotted what looked like small chimneys poking up out of a bush. "That's odd."

Curious, she followed a line of Lacey dolls around the bush and came upon a large dollhouse. She started laughing so hard she could barely catch her breath. Clutching her stomach, she gasped, "No, it would be terrible of me to tease Tim about this. This is serious blackmail material!"

She knelt down in front of the dollhouse and examined the beautiful miniature-mansion. She glanced back at the Laceys standing sentry along the path. "This house is too big for them," she observed. "And it is waaay too classy. It's not like the plastic Lacey dollhouses I've seen at the store."

She opened the polished front door—it was surprisingly heavy for its size. "Must be made out of real wood," Molly surmised. She poked her head inside, and took in a sharp breath.

It was the most beautiful home she'd ever seen—real or toy. Far and away nicer than any real place she'd ever been. The house was definitely built on a much larger scale than the Lacey dolls. It was almost big enough to have been designed for a child. Someone slightly smaller than Molly but bigger than any ordinary doll.

"What else do they have in here?" She wriggled her head and shoulders deeper inside to get a better look at the interior.

"Wow," she breathed. Elegant furnishings upholstered in rich materials decorated what was meant to be the living room. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling and cast sparkling light around the room. What surprised Molly the most was the real fire burning in the stone fireplace.

Molly couldn't help herself—she had to see more. Wiggling and squirming, she crawled forward on her stomach, fitting herself through the narrow doorway. She managed to get herself all the way inside and sat up. It was a tight fit, but by bringing her knees up to her chest and slumping, she managed to keep from banging her head on the ceiling.

"It's just like a real house!" she exclaimed.

Wham! The dollhouse door slammed shut, and a shadow darkened the windows.

"It *is* a real house, crawly Molly!" the shadow said. "But, whoopsie, you did not safely lock the door!"

Molly heard the sound of locks being turned, and as the shadow moved back from the house she could now see that it was what appeared to be a large pink dinosaur!

"What the—" Molly sputtered. She flung

herself at the door, knocking over the furniture. "Hey! Let me out of here!" she shouted, pounding on the door, rattling the doorknob. "And I mean *now*!"

"Hushy, hushy," the pink dinosaur said, pushing its nose up against one of the windowpanes. Molly recoiled. *Those are some serious teeth,* she thought. *And it may be pink, but it sure isn't pretty.*

She wasn't going to let some dumb dinosaur get the best of her. "I am not a doll!" she screeched. "I want out."

Another dinosaur peered in through a different window. "Shamey, shamey. Play nice, little girl. Nice girlies don't shout."

"You will be someone's dolly very soon," the first dinosaur said. "Won't that be fun?"

Now a third dinosaur appeared behind them and clapped its tiny front paws together. "Ohhhh. Play dress up in little sparkly things. You will smile and smile but never laugh."

Molly had never imagined dinosaurs would talk baby talk. Or that creatures who looked like they were made of cotton candy and Silly Putty could be so frightening. She had a strong feeling Tim had never imagined them either.

How can I fight these bizzaro creatures? She knew she was surrounded. "Help! Tim! Crimple!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. She kicked hard against the walls of the tiny house. "Somebody

help me! The retarded lizards have got me!"

"Ooooh, she is making very rude and loud noises," one of the dinosaurs said.

"Tut-tut. This will never do," another dinosaur fretted.

"We will have to take care of this. Very fast."

Crimple's ears pricked up. That scream. Was that Molly? "Excuse me," he called as he stood up. "Did you say 'help,' Molly, miss?"

He headed toward the sound. "The Opener would never forgive me if I allowed her to lose herself entirely," he muttered. "I wouldn't forgive *myself*. She did so nicely try to make me wings." He tripped over some roots. "I wish I had a pair now," he grumbled as he picked himself up and hurried along the uneven ground. "Oh, frick and fritters!"

He stopped when he came upon a group of ladies taller than him. He scratched his head, perplexed. "How odd. They don't belong here," he murmured. He made his way through the snaking line of costumed ten-inch-tall ladies. He stopped in front of one in an elegant evening gown.

"Excuse me, have you seen Molly?" he asked. He waited but she didn't respond. In fact, her expression didn't change. She just stared down at the little bouquet of flowers she held in her dainty hands.

Perhaps she was too well-brought up to speak to someone she had not been introduced to. He bowed. "Good day. My name is Crimple," he said. "Pardon me, but have you seen a flesh person shouting 'help' and 'lizards' or something of that sort?"

Why doesn't she answer? Frustration made him bold. He grabbed her little bouquet and stared down at it. "Wh-what?" The flowers weren't real. He peered more closely at the woman. "You're not real either," he declared.

The ground rumbled and a dark shadow loomed over Crimple. He squeezed his eyes shut, not daring to look.

"You should always *ask* first," a deep voice rumbled.

One of Crimple's eyes popped open. He gazed up at a gigantic pink dinosaur. "Ask?" Crimple repeated.

"Before you play with other people's toys." The dinosaur reached down and picked up the plastic woman Crimple had been speaking to. "Her dress is dirty now," the dinosaur complained. "With nasty dust and germs." The creature dropped the doll into a large sack.

"Oh, my, spittle spattle." Crimple wrung his hands. He knew he was in trouble now.

The dinosaur glared at Crimple and brought his face down close to the little narl. "Did you say 'spit'? Spit is a bad word. Naughty-naughty. Little people must not say it."

"We mustn't?" Crimple said. "Oh, I am so sorry. I had no idea. I do hope I haven't offended you. I didn't mean to play with your toy either. I only meant to ask directions. I'm trying to find my friend Molly, you see and—"

The dinosaur seized Crimple and lifted him off the ground. "Molly is a girl! I know where Molly is! Ask me to tell, with sugar and spice and everything nice."

"You won't mind?" Crimple asked, wondering if it would actually be as simple as that.

"Ask,'pretty please with sugar and spice.'"

"Uh, pretty please, sir, with sugar and spice, where is Molly?"

"Funny little person. My teeth laugh at you. You should never talk to strangers. Didn't you learn that?"

The dinosaur dropped Crimple into the large sack, which Crimple discovered was filled with dolls.

A moment later, Crimple felt the dinosaur's grip again. He was pulled from the sack and flung through the door of a house. Multiple locks

clanged, clicked, and clacked behind him. In front of him, Molly sat cross-legged in the center of the room, filling much of the space.

"Crimple! They caught you, too!" she cried.

"I'm afraid so," Crimple confessed. "For here I am."

"Well done!" a voice outside the dollhouse cheered. Molly peered out the window and saw that a new creature had joined the dinosaurs. A small blue figure wearing an hourglass on a chain around his neck stood smiling at the dollhouse.

He looks like an oversized infant, with that chubby belly and bald head, Molly thought. But his voice sounded ancient, and there was no innocence in those wide-set round eyes.

"Who's that?" Molly whispered. Crimple clambered to the window, but he was too small to see over the sill. Molly lifted him up, but the blue creature had moved out of sight.

"Now let's leave this miserable plane of existence," the blue creature ordered.

"Yes, Barbatos," a pink dinosaur replied.

Molly could see that the absurd pink dinosaurs stood on each side of the house. She and Crimple slid against the wall as the dinosaurs lifted the house from the ground.

"Ready?" the blue creature called Barbatos said.

"Oh, yessy-yessy," replied the dinosaurs.

"Good." Barbatos snapped his fingers, and the woods, the clearing, the lot, and the Laceys all vanished.

Chapter Four

FEAR HIT TIM LIKE a cold slap of water as he heard Molly scream for help. "Molly's in trouble," he said to Tanger. "She'd never call for help if she didn't mean it."

He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Molly! Molly!" he shouted. He paused, waiting to hear her reply. Nothing. "I wish she'd scream again."

Tanger gasped. "You shouldn't say things like that, Opener. Not you, of all people. Not *here*. There's no telling who or what might hear you and oblige by granting your wish."

"Oh, sure," Tim scoffed, "like anyone ever listens to me."

"Botheration!" Tanger snapped. "You're the *Opener*, lad. Everything here owes its shape to you. So don't go wishing for screams unless you really want to hear some—and you don't care how

or why they come about!"

"Hey—I'm sorry, all right?" Tim said. "It's just that I'm worried. Really, *really* worried. Molly shouting for help—that's just not the kind of thing she does. That means she's truly in trouble."

"We will do our very best to find her, then," Tanger declared.

Tim flung his hands up in exasperation. "In the movies a person can always tell where the 'helps' are coming from." He kicked a root. "But here it's hopeless."

Tanger shook his head, removed his tiny spectacles, and rubbed his face. "Oh, *please* don't say that," he said, letting out a weary sigh. "Say instead, 'It *seems* hopeless' or 'I *feel* hopeless,' but not 'It *is* hopeless.' Don't make it a reality unless you are quite, quite certain and ready for the consequences."

Tim's shoulders slumped. *This place also has its rules, he realized. Rules for me, just as there are rules for Tanger and Crimple*. What was most disconcerting was that the rules indicated that being the Opener in a place like this carried a lot of responsibility. Which meant that unless he learned those rules—and fast—everyone around him could be in danger.

Just when I was starting to feel as if I was finally belonging to magic—that the world of magic was

actually my world—I'm hit once again by its complications. Not half an hour ago he had been feeling like he could share his magic life with Molly, that he knew the lay of the land a bit, and now he was as lost in confusion as ever. He had brought Molly here, and now she was in danger. It was because of him. *And I don't know how to fix it.*

Then an idea occurred to him. "Wait!" he exclaimed. "We could . . . uhm . . ." He shook his head uncertainly. "No, that's silly." Then he bit his lip, his brown eyes narrowing. "Still . . . so what if it *is* silly. It could still work."

"Have you an idea, Opener?" Tanger asked.

"I do. It might—no," Tim corrected himself, remembering that in this place his beliefs had potential to manifest. "It will work. It *will*. Tanger, could you find me a stone?"

"Most happy to oblige, Opener!"

Tanger searched for a stone as Tim rummaged in his pocket for his keys. Tim could see that his new resolve had galvanized the narl.

"You were right," Tim told Tanger as he took a smooth, flat stone from the little fellow. "I *am* a stump head. I should have thought of this ages ago."

Using his keys, Tim scratched an *M* and an arrow onto it. "I've been working on this handy little trick. It's a spell to find lost objects."

"Sounds very handy, indeed," Tanger commented.

"Yeah, especially since I'm always losing my keys," Tim replied. He held out the stone for Tanger to see. "See? The *M* is for Molly, the arrow is for directions. It's going to tell us which way to go to find her."

"Do you really think so?" Tanger asked.

"I *believe* so, and since you keep telling me that we're in a place where my beliefs become real . . . "

Tim straightened up. "Okay, rock, point us in the right direction!" Tim flipped the rock into the air. It vanished in a puff of smoke.

"Huh," Tim said. "I don't know why that didn't work."

"Plates and pie pans!" Tanger exclaimed. "Indeed it *did* work. That was your answer, Opener. She's not here anymore."

"Then where is she?" Tim asked.

"Somewhere else?" Tanger offered.

That's a lot of help, Tim thought, but he held his tongue. He knew Tanger was as concerned as he was, and as baffled. "That spell has always worked before," Tim said. "Maybe with a slight adjustment we can get a clearer answer."

Tim picked up another rock and this time he scratched Crimple's initial and an arrow. "I'm

hoping he's with Molly," he explained. He held the stone out in front of him. "Okay, rock. Show me where Crimple is, even if it is outside the meadow. Any universe, world, neighborhood, dimension. We want to see him in his new place."

He flipped the stone again. As the rock spun in front of them, it glowed pink and seemed to hesitate in the air. An image appeared inside the glowing sphere the rock had become.

"It's them!" Tim gasped.

Molly and Crimple were in what looked like a giant dollhouse in a bubblegum-pink world. They sat at a table set for tea, and the guests were dolls, stuffed animals—and several large pink dinosaurs.

The stone blinked out and dropped to the ground with a thud.

"Did you see that?" Tim whispered.

"Indeed I did," Tanger replied.

The tone in Tanger's voice told Tim that the narl knew more about the situation than Tim did. "Do you know where they are?"

Tanger swallowed hard. "Yes, Opener," he said. "They're in the Demon Playland."

Chapter Five

"DEMON PLAYLAND?" TIM REPEATED. He didn't like the sound of that. Not one bit. He cleared his throat. "Uh, I'm guessing that's not so good for Molly and Crimple."

Tanger shook his head sadly. "No, it's not, or I'm a spatula."

"So those lizard dinosaury things are . . ." Tim could barely get the word out. "They are demons?"

"Unmistakably," Tanger replied. He scratched the top of his head. "Although I didn't know they came in pink."

"You've seen demons before?" Tim exclaimed. He couldn't imagine the sweet little narl facing down something as terrifying as a demon. "When?"

"Why, when my place was different, Opener," Tanger explained. "I haven't always been a narl, you know."

"No, I didn't know," Tim said.

"You're not the only Opener I've had dealings with. Every one of you has imagined things quite differently. I've had many places in my time. And took on many different shapes."

"Really," Tim said, studying the little creature. "No wonder you know more about this Opener business than I do."

"But that's neither here nor there," Tanger said. "We have other fish to fry now, or so it seems."

Tim thought about the image the stone had shown them. "It was so . . . pink." Tim shuddered. "Molly must feel so out of place in a puffy pink world."

"I'll reckon Crimple is feeling his out of placeness too," Tanger said. "So shall we go find them, while I'm still more or less alive? I would like to spend a little more time with Crimple before I die."

Tim was about to tell Tanger that he wasn't going to die but stopped himself. For all Tim knew, the narl was right, and leaving his place was going to be fatal to him.

"I suspect you feel the same way about Molly, don't you?" Tanger added.

"Yes, I do," Tim agreed. "So let's go."

"Do you know how to get there, Opener?"

Tim could feel all of Tanger's hopes resting on him. "I don't know for sure, but I have an idea."

"Your last idea worked exceedingly well," Tanger said. "You made a way to find out where they are."

"You're right." Tanger's compliment gave Tim some more confidence.

He pulled the Opening Stone from his pocket. He shut his eyes and held it in his right hand, feeling it grow warm. His fingers tingled as the stone vibrated with energy.

"Er, excuse my interruption," Tanger said, breaking Tim's concentration. Tim opened his eyes. "I'd like to point out something. We're entering a demon world."

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Tim said.

"Well, it's just a suggestion, but don't you think we should arm ourselves?"

"With what?" Tim asked.

"Swords of sharpness, sandals of swiftness, invisibility cloaks—that kind of thing."

"Did your other Openers have things like that?"

Tanger nodded. "Some of them."

"Well, I don't," Tim admitted. "Besides, I don't think we want to waste any time in packing."

"Quite right, quite right," Tanger said, wringing his hands. "Time is of grave importance when

dealing with demons. Never good to be around them for too long, don't you know."

Tim took a deep breath and closed his eyes again. *Focus*, he told himself. "Open the pathway to the world we just saw," Tim commanded the stone. "Open the way to the Demon Playland."

Tim felt a breeze rustle his hair and heard a faint roaring sound like the ocean in a seashell. He kept his eyes squeezed shut, pouring all of his concentration into the stone.

A moment later, Tim was aware that the temperature had changed. So had the smell in the air and the sounds. He was somewhere else—he knew that without even opening his eyes. The stone grew cold again, though it hummed as if a faint current still ran through it.

Then he remembered that he had opened a door to a demon world, and standing in it with his eyes closed was a seriously stupid move. His eyes popped open.

The first thing he noticed was what *wasn't* there—Tanger.

"Great," Tim muttered. "I would have liked to have had the feisty little narl along on this adventure. I guess I should have held his hand or something while I made the trip."

Magic is always so complicated, he reminded himself. *So many variables to keep track of.* Then

his heart thudded as a new thought entered his brain. "What if he did make the trip with me, but somehow we got separated?" he worried. "He could be here somewhere, lost, alone, afraid. . . ."

Okay, if you think about rescuing too many people at once, smoke's going to steam out of your ears, Tim admonished himself. *Concentrate on finding Molly and Crimple. Then they can help you track down Tanger, if he's here.*

Tim gazed around at the strange colorless landscape. It seemed flat, like a painting, but he could move through it, and objects around him were certainly three-dimensional. He was in a dark wood, filled with tall, scrawny trees and a thick underbrush covering the ground. Whispers and cries and howls hovered just at the edge of his hearing. "Yeah, this seems about right for a place that demons would romp around in," he muttered.

Now to find Molly and Crimple. He reached down, wondering if the rocks in a demon landscape would oblige him the way rocks back home did. Then he froze, his arm outstretched a few inches above the ground. A loud *crrr-aack* had come from just up ahead, as if someone—or some*thing*—had stepped onto a rotten tree branch and broken it. Tanger didn't weigh enough to break a twig unless he tried very hard; whoever was approaching was a stranger.

Tim quickly stood back up. "You out there," he called, mustering up all the bravado he could. "I've got weapons here! Uh, sandals of sharpness—" *No, that can't be right. What had Tanger said?*

"Um, so, show yourself," Tim demanded.

A figure emerged from the bushes, completely shadowed by the thick canopy of trees. Whoever it was wore a cloak and a hood, casting more shadows over his—or *its*—face.

At least he's my size, Tim noted. "Okay, tell me your name," Tim ordered.

"I am no one," the figure replied. "Who are you?"

"No One?" Tim scoffed. "That's not a proper demon name. Even I know that." Then again, the demon may not have wanted Tim to know his name, because names have power. The polite thing would have been for Tim to ask the stranger what he was "called," but Tim wasn't feeling very polite at the moment.

"I am not a demon," the figure in the hooded cloak replied.

"Oh, right, sorry," Tim scoffed. "My mistake. You being dressed up in a sack and hiding your face and flitting around in the demon playground and all, I just assumed—"

"This isn't a demon playground," the figure

argued. "Ummmm. Not necessarily. I mean, it could be. But it doesn't have to be. It all depends."

Tim snorted. "You—you talk just like me. You sound as confused as I feel."

The figure flipped back his hood and now Tim gasped.

He was staring at . . . himself!

Chapter Six

Seriously weird, Tim thought, his eyes never leaving his face. Only, of course, it was his face on someone else's body.

The Other Tim snorted. "Listen, I wouldn't stand around with my mouth open like that if I were you. This place is full of all kinds of creepy crawlies. One could flit right into that gaping maw."

"Now listen, you body snatcher," Tim said. "If you're implying that *I'm* no one by calling yourself that, then you're a lot dumber than you look." *Hey wait*, Tim thought. *Did I just insult myself somehow?* He shook his head. *I talk to myself a lot, but it has never been like this!*

The Other Tim crossed his arms and smirked.

Do I really look that obnoxious when I do that? Tim wondered. *I should rethink that expression.*

"All right," the Other Tim said. "If you're so

sure you're someone, prove it."

"That's stupid," Tim snapped. "I don't have to prove anything. And certainly not to you!"

"Come on, admit it," the Other Tim taunted. "You don't know who you are. You don't have a clue. And you can't prove you're *someone* because you don't know what that really means."

Poof! A little figure appeared just inches above Tim's left ear—smaller even than Tanger or Crimple.

Tim was stunned when he realized it was another—much, much smaller version of—him!

"Uh, I hate to say this, Tim, but he's got a point," the little Tim said.

"Huh?"

Poof! Another Tim popped into being, this time on Tim's right shoulder. "You're such a whiner," the new mini Tim said. "Go lock yourself in your room while we sort this out."

"We?" Tim asked. *How many more of me are there?*

He got his answer. *Poof! Poof! Poof!* Suddenly, he was surrounded by a cloud of Tims! All arguing at once. This wasn't a demon playground, this was Tim's idea of hell!

"Where did all these mes come from?" Tim moaned.

"'Mes'!" The Other Tim sneered. "Listen to

you. Do you sleep through grammar class or do you just not go?"

Tim flicked a little Tim away from his ear; its tiny breath tickled. "I'm terribly sorry, but I don't have time to be scholastic just now. I've got quite a bit on my plate, in case you haven't noticed."

"Honestly, you are so pathetic. How do you get through a day?"

Tim hated admitting this, but the Other Tim was saying things he'd said to himself on more than one occasion.

"Look, I've got to find my friends and rescue Molly," Tim said. "Not necessarily in that order. I have no time for this"— he gestured at all the mini Tims— "this identity crisis."

"You need to know who you are in order to *have* an identity," the Other Tim said.

"You know, you're starting to annoy me," Tim said.

"You tell him," a mini Tim whispered in his ear.

The Other Tim snorted. "That's rich. I'm starting to annoy *you*? Think how I feel, having to look at such a wimpy version of me. Do you know what your problem is?"

"You," Tim replied. "Holding me up and getting in my way."

"Ooooh, don't make him mad," a mini Tim on

his shoulder warned. "This isn't your place, and you don't know your place in it."

Tim gave a sharp shrug and sent the little Tim tumbling down to the ground. Some of the mini Tims laughed, others gasped, a few gnashed their teeth. They seemed to see all sides of every situation simultaneously.

Which is exactly what I do, Tim suddenly realized. *I get so busy working out all the possible outcomes that it paralyzes me.* He let out a low whistle. *I'm in the middle of a lightbulb moment and the only one I can share it with is this bogus version of me.*

"Your problem is—"

"No," Tim said. "I had it right the first time. *You're* the problem. And you're either going to help me by telling me which way to go to find Molly and the narls, or you're going to find yourself sorry that you didn't."

The Other Tim jutted out his chin. "Oh, yeah? How can you threaten *me*? Remember, I know your limits, Hunter."

"Do you?" Tim demanded. "Maybe you haven't been getting the latest updates and bulletins on my progress. I don't know what it says in the Timothy Hunter newsletter, but while I may not do pentagrams or light candles or anything, there *are* things I can do. That I *will* do if I don't get my answer."

I need firepower, Tim thought. *Energy to intimidate the guy. I don't need to use it—I just need to have the appearance of power. Energy, alive and crackling—that's the ticket.*

Tim held out his hand and concentrated hard. He felt a surge through his body, down his arm, and into his hand. He glanced at his palm and saw a glowing sphere. As he concentrated harder, the energy ball lifted from his hand, hovering several inches above it.

The Other Tim's mouth dropped open. "You don't understand," the Other Tim whined. "I can't just show you the way; I'll get into trouble."

Feeling bold now, Tim tossed the energy ball back and forth between his hands. "You know, my auntie Blodwyn collects little porcelain dogs," he said, his tone quite casual. "Pekinese dogs with huge googly eyes, to be exact." He moved his hand into a perfect position to lob the energy ball at the Other Tim. "It's her birthday next week, and I haven't had a chance to go shopping." He cocked his head at the Other Tim. "Catch my drift?"

The Other Tim frowned, and his eyes narrowed behind his glasses. Then he rolled his eyes. "Oh, go that way." He pointed to a path through bare-branched trees. "Keep to the path if you want to be safe. Cut through the woods if you're in a hurry." He smirked again. "Or stupid."

Tim turned to cut through the woods. He was definitely in a hurry. He had wasted too much time talking to "himself."

"You don't even say thank you?" the Other Tim called behind him. "You jerk! You don't have a personality, you have a bloody entourage!"

"Can't argue with him on that point," Tim muttered, shoving his hands into his pockets. The little Tims buzzed around like annoying gnats.

"I can't believe he'd just let us go like that," a little Tim said.

"You're right. This has got to be a trap."

"Never mind all that!" another Tim chimed in. "What I want to know is could we really have done it?" The little Tim tugged on Tim's collar. "Could we?"

"Done what?" Tim asked.

"Could we really have turned him into a porcelain knickknack thingie?"

"I don't know," Tim admitted. "I sort of had a feeling we—" He shook his head. "I mean, *I* could have."

He held out his hand again, remembering the sensations he had during his confrontation with the Other Tim. The energy ball reappeared. "I mean, I was looking at him, the way he smirked and it just popped into my head. He'd fit right in with Auntie's obnoxious dog collection." He

shrugged. "Maybe that's how it's supposed to be, with magic. Maybe the stuff that works is the stuff you don't have to think about."

All the Tims started chattering at once.

"That's a terrible way to think," a little Tim scolded. "You, um, ought to think about everything a long time before you even consider doing anything."

"Really?" another Tim responded. "Do you think so?"

"Oh yes. Well . . . probably."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"I do wonder why he let us go. It could be just a trap and then where'd we be?"

"Where are we *now*? That's what I'd like to know."

"We should have a plan, not just walk blindly through a place we don't know that's populated by demons."

Tim picked up speed. He dashed under low branches, over gnarled roots, around shrubs, hoping he'd lose the chorus of Tims. No such luck. They could fly and were so small, they had a much easier time in this grasping, clutching landscape where every tree limb or mound of dirt seemed intent on tripping him and his human-sized feet. *All I'm doing is wearing myself out,* he realized, and stopped his mad charge through the shadowy

forest. He trudged more slowly, working hard to ignore the continual chatter of the swarm of Tims.

He rounded a bend, and found himself facing a bridge. It looked like an ordinary wooden bridge—slats, boards, sides—only Tim couldn't see the other end or what the bridge spanned, hidden by a thick fog that had suddenly appeared. He heard no sound of water—lapping, rushing, babbling, or otherwise—so the bridge didn't cross a river. So why was it here?

"Uh-oh," the Tim on his right shoulder said. "A bridge."

"Should we cross it?" the Tim near his left ear asked.

"Um, I don't know," a Tim hovering over Tim's head said. "Do you think we should?"

"Uh, I wouldn't," said a Tim, clutching the left side of Tim's neck.

"But I would."

"So would we."

"Not us!"

"Enough!" Tim cried. As he stood staring at the bridge listening to the Tims, Tim clenched and unclenched his fists. Without realizing it, he created another energy ball. When he noticed it, a slow grin lifted his mouth. He dashed forward, whipped around, and then using the glowing sphere like a bowling ball, he zapped all the little

Tims off to the side of the path. As they tumbled and scattered, he quickly strode to the center of the bridge before they could say another word. Then he turned and glared at the collection of Tims, who all stared back at him.

"This has always been my problem," he told the little Tims, "and it's going to end now. If I listen to all the voices in my head I'll never get anywhere."

He turned his back and kept walking. *And I really need to do something about all those "ums."*

"Um, you really shouldn't take such rash action." A little Tim suddenly fluttered down in front of Tim's face. "You have to think things over thoroughly. Weigh the consequences. Hold still."

Tim stopped and stared at the Tim hovering just at eye level.

"Don't move until you understand all the possible outcomes. Do you have the slightest idea what's on the other side of this bridge?"

"I know that I have to find Molly," Tim told the annoying little Tim. "And I know she isn't here. So I have to go somewhere else."

"But —"

Tim had had enough. He held up his hand and created another energy ball.

The little Tim looked nervous. "You wouldn't,

would you? Uh, but then again . . .” He vanished with a little *poof*.

“Now maybe I can get somewhere,” Tim muttered, letting the energy ball disperse. “I’ve been known to spend hours arguing with myself, and I just don’t have the time for that right now.”

The little Tims flitted back around him. “Hah!” one exclaimed. “We taught that little stuttering stick-in-the-mud a lesson.”

“Get real,” another Tim argued. “You know as well as I do that he hasn’t learned a darn thing. We got rid of him. That’s all.”

“Oh yeah?” another Tim piped up. “He knows he’s not wanted now, doesn’t he?”

“That doesn’t mean he’s learned anything. None of us ever learns things. We can’t. We’re too small. We’ve only got room enough to be what we already are. Change takes up space.”

“Is anyone besides me interested in getting out of this stupid forest?” Tim demanded.

“Go right ahead, Mr. Sarcasm,” a little Tim huffed. “Don’t let me stop you.”

Tim shook his head and started walking again.

“Halt!” a voice bellowed from down around his feet. “Who’s that sneaking across my bridge?”

Tim stared at the crevice under his foot. One

toe poked over the edge of a dark chasm. He'd been so distracted by the little Tims that he never noticed the disconcerting gap right in front of him.

"Are you talking to me," Tim asked the unseen voice, "or was that a rhetorical question?"

A deep rumbling shook the bridge. Tim watched in amazement as the chasm opened up. The little Tims were so startled that they found places to perch on Tim. He had little Tims clinging to his ears, sitting on his shoulders, standing on his head, and poking out of his pockets. They peered down silently.

A huge green creature was turning a crank that made a loud screeching sound. Tim could see that this device made a wooden platform carrying the creature rise out of the darkness below. *That machinery could definitely use a good oiling,* Tim noted, gritting his teeth at the earsplitting sound. He peered past the monstrous green guy, trying to see what lay below, but all Tim saw was darkness.

Then Tim studied the creature rising in front of him. He was burly and thick, with bulging arms and a low flat forehead. Although he was much, much bigger than Tim, the guy had the appearance of being short and squat, probably because his legs and arms were so huge, and he was nearly as wide as he was tall. He seemed to be made of solid muscle.

There was something familiar about this scene, Tim realized. Ugly dude under a bridge, coming up when someone tries to cross . . . Tim vaguely remembered a child's story about just this thing.

"Don't tell me—" Tim began.

"Oh, I'll tell you all right." The creature's head was slowly moving up above the bridge. "Your creepy sneakers won't be crossing no bridges 'round here," the creature said in a gruff Cockney accent. "That is, 'less you're up to—"

"Paying the toll?" Tim cut in. *That's how it went in the story, anyway.*

"How'd you know my name's Toll?" the creature asked in surprise. "That's supposed to be a secret, what I keep hid from all and sundry."

This could work in my favor, Tim thought. *Knowing someone's name gave you power.*

The troll—for Tim figured that was what Toll was, peered suspiciously at Tim. "Say, you wouldn't be one of them magicians, would you?"

"Ah, right then," Tim muttered. *Well, here goes.* He held his hands up and announced in the most authoritative voice possible. "I am Tim, the great and terrible! Uh, the terribly powerful . . . something like that."

Toll didn't seem to be particularly impressed.

Tim licked his lips nervously and continued.

"These are my, uh, accursed minions. The, uh, mes!" He gestured at the little Tims. They sprang into action, hovering in a cloud around Tim. "Sowers of discord," he declared, "bringers of headaches. Annoyers par excellence! Et cetera." *And every word of that is true*, he added to himself.

The Tims waved at the troll. A few bowed. Then Tim crossed his arms over his chest and all the little Tims did, too. "Let us pass," he demanded.

The little Tims all glared at the troll.

The troll cranked his platform so that he was now eye level with Tim. "Okey-dokey, terribly Tim. Which of my convenient payment options will your wizardliness be using today?"

Well, it worked. Sort of, Tim thought. "Don't I get to cross for free?" he asked.

"Heh-heh. Nice try, boy." The troll laughed, revealing mossy green teeth. "Magicians don't pay the same as other folks, but that don't mean they cross for free. So will you be putting this on your karma card or will you be reading me the story?"

"Karma card?" Tim repeated. "Uh, I seem to have left that at home. So I suppose I'll be reading the story. If it's not too long, that is, and if it won't whisk me anywhere or turn me into anything," he added hastily. *You never know, with magic*.

The little Tims all seemed to be about to say something, but he gave them all a quick dirty look. They shut their mouths instantly. Tim smirked. *They must be afraid I'll get rid of them like I did that other Tim.*

"Nothing like that, terribly Tim," the troll said, waving a fleshy hand at him. "It's just a story. There's no magic in it. Apart from the usual, of course."

"Of course," Tim repeated as he watched Toll reach underneath his platform and pull out an enormous, thick book. "I, uh, I don't have to read you the whole thing, do I?" Tim asked. "I have somewhere I have to be."

"No, no, just read your own story." The troll handed Tim the book, then reached under the platform and pulled out a long pipe. He lit it and settled back comfortably.

Tim flipped the huge, heavy tome open. His eyes widened. "Hey, these pages are blank!"

Chapter Seven

"A TOAST TO MOLLY!" a pink dinosaur cheered, holding up a delicate teacup.

Molly glared at the pudgy pink creature sitting across the table from her. She was still trapped in the dollhouse, but somehow it had expanded. The chair she sat on was now the right size, though the ceiling was still close to her head. To make it all worse, it had transformed from the elegant mansion she had discovered in the woods into a pink nightmare of a plastic playhouse. She felt cramped by the odd scale and suffocated by the group of dinosaurs all grinning at her. And she felt furious at being trapped in this ridiculous situation. Most especially she was angry that she was feeling so afraid.

Afraid of dinosaurs who look like giant pink marshmallows. What is wrong with me? She glanced down at the narl Crimple. He sat on the chair next

to her, dwarfed now by the size of the furniture. *If he can be brave,* she determined, *so can I.*

"Sippy sip with us, Molly dolly!" another dinosaur chirped. "There is no bad caffeine in these cups."

"To hairstyling appointments," the third pink dino said, raising his delicate teacup toward Molly. "There will be many in your future. And fingernail painting. Toenails, too!"

"To the itsy-bitsy waist you will have and the pretty, shiny dresses you will always wear!"

"Do you have any idea what they're hinting at?" Crimple whispered.

"I wouldn't call it hinting, Crimple." Molly picked up the Lacey doll that sat beside Crimple on the chair. She shook the doll in disgust. "They want to turn me into one of these. They want to make me grow up to be just what these dolls are—decorative, sexy, brainless, and silent."

"But why?" Crimple asked.

Molly was too aggravated to sit still. She stood and paced in front of the table, ignoring the shocked expressions of the pink creatures sipping tea.

"They told me that I'm being groomed to grow up to marry some nasty old magician," Molly explained through gritted teeth. Every time she thought about this plan it infuriated her all over again. "And they want me to grow up right now."

"No!" Crimple exclaimed.

"Yes! Can you believe it? They said I have to learn to smile all the time and wiggle when I walk! And embroider. Of all things! As if anyone cared about making dainty doilies." She glared at the Lacey doll again. "But most important of all, I have to look like this!"

She felt hot breath on the back of her head.

"Er, Molly," Crimple said uncertainly.

Molly whirled around and faced the pink dino looming over her squarely. "I'm not smiling or wiggling, blimpo," she snarled. "I don't care what you do."

She flung the doll across the table, scattering teacups and dainty sandwiches.

An angry pink lizard leaped to its enormous feet.

"Nasty girl," the dinosaur growled. "You made me spill! Now there's tea on my tummy and on the pretty-pretty rug."

"You made a messy mess," the other dinosaur scolded. "You must tidy before it stains."

"I don't see why," Molly retorted. "You're a horrid color anyway. You *and* the rug. It's as if a bubblegum factory exploded in here. I wouldn't touch either of you with a ten-foot scrub brush."

"I am going to tell on you, piggy Molly, who makes messes. I am going to tell your governess

and she will make you mind."

"Yeah, right," Molly scoffed. "I'd like to see her try."

"I do not *try*, child. I succeed," a voice behind Molly rasped.

Molly's scalp prickled. That voice. She'd never heard a sound that chilled her more. She forced herself to turn around. Her blood ran even colder as she gazed at the tall, ancient woman glaring down at her.

"I am your governess, child," the woman said, sounding like a Halloween wind. She had a voice of decay, of darkness, of chills, and hostility. "My name is Vuall. But you will address me as miss." A knitting basket dangled from the woman's scrawny arm.

Molly didn't want the woman to know how unnerved she felt. *Better to stand up to her right from the start. Make her back off.* "You don't look like much of a 'miss' to me," Molly retorted, "you stringy old cow."

The woman's skull-like face creased with even more wrinkles, as if Molly had made a bad, and unfunny, joke. "Oho! Sauce from such a soft-skinned little rabbit." She tapped her long, bony fingertips together, making a clicking sound as she did. *Does she have any flesh on her?* Molly wondered. She also noticed, with a growing sense of

dread, that the dinosaurs had all vanished. Were they afraid of Vuall? Or was Vuall so powerful and dangerous that she didn't need dinosaurs to help her? Neither thought was very reassuring.

"Do you know what a governess is, my pretty?" Vuall said.

"Only from the movies. They take care of snotty, pampered rich kids." Molly placed her hands on her hips, holding her ground. "Which I am not!" *This eight-foot skeleton isn't going to scare me.*

The old crone didn't seem fazed at all by Molly's defiance. She spoke calmly, almost as if she were bored. "Movies are not real." Vuall sniffed. "Now I suggest you prepare yourself, Miss O'Reilly. You are about to learn."

Molly narrowed her eyes and jutted out her chin. "Yeah? Try and make me."

Vuall reached into her knitting basket and pulled out what looked like a nasty pair of gardening shears. Moving astonishingly quickly, Vuall picked up Crimple and slid his neck between the blades of the shears. It all happened before Molly could move.

"No!" Molly cried. "Don't hurt him!"

Crimple seemed too terrified to scream. He shut his eyes, and Molly could see his tiny wooden chest rising and falling rapidly with his short, shallow breaths.

"Let him go!" Molly demanded.

Vuall stared down her long nose at Molly. "Your plea is quite indelicately phrased. Far too forceful for a proper young lady." She began to squeeze the handles of the shears. Crimple went limp.

"Okay, teach me!" Molly pleaded. "Tell me the correct way to save him!"

Vuall paused and pondered for a moment. "You might try saying something like this: 'If you please, miss, do relent. I shan't disobey ever again. You have my word on it.' Then, perhaps, I won't dull my shears on your woody little friend."

Molly could feel tears of frustration and fury spring into her eyes. She hated to give in to the rotten crone, but she could not allow Vuall to hurt Crimple. Even if that meant throwing aside her pride and anger.

"Please, miss," Molly said in the softest voice she could manage. "Please do relent. I shan't disobey ever again." She stopped and cleared her throat; she felt as if her meek words were gagging her. She crossed her fingers behind her back before continuing. "You have my word on it." She gazed straight into Vuall's skull-like face, mustering an innocent expression. *That's right, eyes wide and cowlike,* Molly told herself. *That's what she wants from me.*

"That is much better, child. Perhaps you are not quite the hopeless case you appear to be." She placed Crimple on the floor.

He scurried behind Molly's legs and clung to them. She could feel him shaking. "Oh, thank you, Molly, my dear," he gasped.

Molly knelt down, even though she knew it would probably displease Vuall.

"Are you all right?" she asked Crimple.

Crimple rubbed his neck and winced. Molly could see several splinters sticking out at odd angles where Vuall had applied pressure with her enormous scissors.

Crimple must have noticed Molly's worried expression. He smiled bravely and stood up very straight. "No permanent damage, miss. Faced far worse from woodpeckers and termites."

"I promise I won't let her hurt you," Molly told him.

"And I make you the same vow," replied Crimple.

Clack-clack! Vuall clapped her bony hands together. "Enough. It is time for lessons. Sit," she ordered Molly, pointing to a hard, straight-backed chair near the fireplace.

Molly did as she was told. She wouldn't risk Crimple's life for the sake of her pride. Somehow, she would find a way to save them both. Until she

had a plan, she would play along.

Molly suffered through a series of absurd so-called lessons. She pricked her fingers a hundred times while being taught to embroider. She was instructed in proper posture, and Vuall told her that once she'd mastered basic deportment, they would move into the more advanced skills of walking in high-heeled shoes and sashaying. All along Vuall kept talking about Molly's future and the real purpose behind all this training. "Remember, child, you are being groomed to be the perfect wife of a powerful magician."

Every time Molly made a mistake, Vuall would say, "The master was quite explicit about what he wanted," or "Oh, no, that will never do for the master." It gave Molly the creeps—not just the idea that she'd been kidnapped and was going to be handed over to some horrible magician like a piece of property. No, what was far worse was that he had gone to all the trouble of choosing her and trapping her, only to be this intent on changing her. And what he wanted her to become disgusted her: passive, docile, empty-headed, doll-like.

Now Molly sat in the darkening room, with Crimple at her feet. She peered at a thick book of etiquette and rubbed her eyes. "Can we have some more light?" she asked. "I can hardly see the words."

Vuall clucked disapprovingly from her rocking chair opposite Molly. "You are to make do," she said. "Accept your lot with a smile. Others wiser than you will make your decisions and determine what you do and don't have." Vuall put down her knitting. "And now a quiz."

Oh joy, Molly thought.

"What have you learned so far?"

Molly bit her lip. There was no good way to answer that question without getting herself into trouble.

"Come now, child. Speak up. Certainly I have not wasted my time in instructing you, have I? You must have learned *something* today."

"Uh, yeah. I mean, yes, miss," Molly corrected herself hurriedly as she noticed Vuall reaching for her shears again. Crimple scurried behind Molly's chair.

"Give me an example."

Molly ran over some of the lessons shoved down her throat. "I learned that the key to happiness is to spend a lot of time doing your hair."

"That is a start. And why is it important to pay attention to your grooming?"

Molly remembered the "instructive stories" Vuall had read to her, all about well-behaved girls who came to be happy in their captivity, who spent hours on their appearances and lived happily ever

after. Who snared princes as husbands because of their legendary beauty. But what had struck Molly the most was that beauty was their only asset. None of them had any spunk or integrity or did anything, although as princesses they had the thrill of being able to order other people around, eventually.

"Because if you're pretty enough you can get away with anything," Molly muttered.

"Hmph."

Molly could tell that Vuall didn't approve of her interpretation of the day's lessons.

"You know what else I learned?" Molly continued. "That according to you, there's no point in worrying about who you are inside. Not when you're a girl, anyway. Because nobody cares about that. It's just your accessories that count."

"I sense you object to these truths."

That was it. Molly couldn't take anymore.

"Of course I object! You cynical old bag of unliberated bones," she shouted. "What would you know about anything, anyway? You're stuck in a demon's world. And you're just kowtowing to some stupid old magician's orders."

"Tut, Miss O'Reilly. If your intent is to injure my feelings, I'm afraid I must disappoint you. I have no feelings." She reached into her basket and pulled out the shears again. "Unlike your

easily pruneable little friend here."

Molly hurled her book straight at Vuall's head. She would not let that horrible crone harm Crimple. The book connected with Vuall's skull with a loud *thwack*. "Score!" Molly cried as Vuall lost her balance and toppled over, knocking over the chair. "Crimple, grab her earring."

Crimple flung himself at the looping metal chains hanging from Vuall's ears. As she tried to pick herself up off the floor, he gripped the chains and swung, tugging with all his might.

"Aaaaaahhh!" Vuall shrieked. "My ear!"

"You naughty thing," Crimple scolded. "You lied. You *do* have feelings. In your earlobes, at any rate."

"Stop! Stop right now!" Vuall screamed.

"Good job." Molly praised the little twiggy fellow who hung a few inches from the floor. She crossed to Vuall and yanked the chain dangling from Vuall's other ear, forcing her down to the floor. Crimple managed to get his footing again.

"Now what?" Crimple asked. Molly handed him the other earring and he wrapped the chains around his arms and lay down on the floor. He used all his weight, bracing himself so that she wouldn't be able to wriggle free.

"Now we convince the old bat to get us home."

"Never," Vuall rasped.

Crimple gave the chains a sharp jerk. "You really should have been more careful," Crimple said. "These dangly things can catch on all sorts of inconvenient items."

"She never expected to have anyone stand up to her, I suppose," Molly said. She knelt down and spoke directly into Vuall's wrinkled, dried-up face. "You underestimated us," she told the crone. "After all, I'm just a girl, right?"

"And I'm just a narl," Crimple added. "But together we're formidable." He grinned up at Molly.

"So how do we get out of this place and back home?" Molly demanded.

Vuall stayed silent.

"I think we're going to have to persuade her to speak," Crimple said. "But how do we do that?"

Molly scanned the dollhouse, wondering if there was something they could use to threaten Vuall. *Nothing*. Maybe there would be something in the knitting basket. Not a weapon but some precious object of the old bat's to barter with.

She rummaged through the knitting basket, finding a bizarre collection of objects: sharp implements and unfamiliar tools crammed in with hair-styling products, makeup, doilies, and cookbooks.

"I don't know, Crimple. I don't know what

most of these things are." She held up a lethal-looking silver item with a retractable blade. "They all look dangerous."

"We could experiment," Crimple suggested.

"No," Molly said. "There must be a better way to make her take us home. If we start acting like demons ourselves, we might get stuck here. We might never be able to leave if we become like them. Like her."

"Quite right," Crimple said. He sounded embarrassed by his idea.

"I am tempted to do something about her hair, though," Molly said, gazing at Vuall thoughtfully. "Granny always said that wearing a tight bun made her cross, and this is one cross woman we have here."

"Did you hear that, you old spider?" Crimple taunted. "Take us home or we'll prune your hair."

"Never!" Vuall retorted. "And the correct phrase is 'trim' not 'prune.'"

Molly smirked and took another step toward Vuall. "Gee. I guess you've never seen a Mohawk."

Tim gazed at the heavy book that lay across his knees. *Is it some kind of trick?* he wondered. *How can I meet the troll's demands to read a story if the pages are all blank?*

A mini Tim landed on the open book and pulled back another page. He peered under it. "Still blank," he said.

"Now what?" a little Tim on his shoulder whispered in Tim's ear.

Tim glanced at the troll. The squat creature sat back and took a deep drag on his pipe. He seemed quite settled in. *I am definitely not going anywhere until this story thing happens.*

Tim sighed. He felt as if he'd arrived in school without realizing there was going to be an exam. And Toll the Troll had the smug expression of someone just waiting to catch a guy making a fool of himself.

"Uh, could this be the wrong book?" Tim said. He held it up for the troll to see. "All the pages are blank."

A little Tim gasped. "Oooh," he murmured. "You just admitted you can't see anything in the book. That could be bad."

"Oh, you'll get to your story eventually," Toll the Troll assured Tim. He didn't seem surprised or bothered that Tim saw the book's pages as blank.

"*My* story?" Tim's eyebrows rose as the troll's words sunk in.

"Yep. That particular book there, it whips up stories for whoever's reading it. Different stories for different folks. Personalized, like."

The troll patted his huge belly and yawned as if having to explain bored him. "You don't think I'd swap you a bridge-crossing for a story I could read myself, do you? I need some entertainment!"

Tim looked around at the landscape and then down below into the troll's lair. Yeah, he could believe it would get mighty dull around here without telly or video games. Just a lot of darkness and wind and whispering sounds. He ached to escape quickly, to find Molly and get out of there, but he had come to learn that magical journeys often had paths of their own. He had to put one foot in front of the other and find his way out of each particular thicket. And right now, reading a story was how he would walk out of this place in one piece. He hoped.

Tim flipped through the pages of the book. Eventually he came to a section that had words and pictures, forming themselves right in front of his eyes. The swirling letters and images made him dizzy, so he shut his eyes for a few minutes, hoping they'd fall into place and he could get on with reading the story. He opened them again and saw that everything had arranged itself on the pages.

"Okay," he told the troll. "I've found it. Let's get this over with—I have places to be."

"Don't rush the story," the troll warned. "Tell it nice."

Tim cleared his throat. "'The Boy Who Chose the Sea,'" he announced, reading the title. He ran his finger along the illustration. It was of a sad-looking boy, about his own age, with wings.

"'Once upon a time, before the earth and sky and sea had come together, there lived a boy named Vane. In those days the sun did not shine on the earth. The earthfolk had to make their own days by lighting tallow candles. They liked very long candles and very long days because they were afraid of the dark.

"'Now, as everyone knows, to deny one's fears is the fifth easiest thing in the world. Few of the earthfolk would admit that the darkness frightened them. Many would not even talk about their candles, though they thought of little else.

"'So most earth children were taught to shut their eyes at bedtime before they blew their candles out. And most boys or girls who asked where the candles came from were sent to bed without any supper. Darkness was a secret they were all keeping.

"'But Vane had never learned not to see the dark or question the light. The boy had been raised by an old blind beggar man who did not believe in day or night. He had never seen them.

"'Now, as everyone knows, to mistake one's ignorance for wisdom is the fourth easiest thing in

the world. Every night, when the city grew quiet, the blind man sent Vane outside to play. He thought that the boy would be safest then. He never knew how often Vane came home with skinned elbows and knees from being unable to find his way. Or with his wings scraped raw from crawling and falling through dark tunnels.

"'One night, when Vane had become even more lost than usual, he saw a light flicker far away. Seeing such a surprising sight, at such an odd hour, made him all but forget the aching of his knees and wings. Vane had always wished that he could meet others who were like him. People who could not sleep when the rest of the world did. People who knew what it was like to have to carry useless, heavy wings on their backs.

"'He followed the light until at last Vane came to a building—the largest he had ever seen. He tried its gate, but it was locked, so Vane began to climb it. He had clambered almost high enough to see inside the building when a voice softly whispered in his ear.

"'"Stop," it said. "You have almost climbed too high."

"'Vane looked to see who had spoken to him. No One was there.

"'"If you go any further, you will see where the light of this world comes from," No One whispered.

"And you will know why your people fear the dark."

"'"I have always wanted to know these things," Vane said. "I will keep climbing. But first, tell me, what are you doing with your wings?"

"'No One sighed and answered, "What I am doing with my wings is the third easiest thing in the world, but this is not the time to talk about it. Let me tell you what you need to know instead. If you do not turn back now, you will never go home again. You will have to choose between the sky and the sea. If you do not die first, which is the most likely outcome."

"'"What is the sky?" Vane asked. "What is the sea?"

"'But No One did not answer. It had used its wings and flown away.

"'No One's warning frightened Vane, but it made him curious, too. So he climbed a little higher and looked down. Inside the building, a big machine was making tallow candles.

"'It made them out of people who were not afraid of the dark.

"'This was the secret that had been hidden.

"'This terrified Vane. He climbed down from the gate and ran into the dark.

"'As everyone knows, to run when one is lost and frightened is the second easiest thing in the

world. Vane ran as fast and as far as he could. So fast and so far that he ran to the edge of the world. There he saw two places he had never seen before. One was like a big hole that went up and up forever. It made Vane feel like he was falling just to look up at the hole. Something whirled out of its vastness and beat savagely against the hole with its wings. It seemed frantic. And at the center of the hole, a monstrous fire was burning. Brighter than a thousand candle flames, its fierce light stabbed Vane's eyes.

"'The other place was very different. It was like a well that went down and down and down. The people who lived there moved as freely as No One had, gliding up and down and around just as they pleased. They did not need candles, or fires. Each glowed with a soft, pale light that seemed to come from inside them—'"

Tim slammed the book shut. "Let me guess," he declared. "Vane never figures out how to fly. He jumps in the sea and drowns. Glub, glub, glub. The end."

"Yep!"

"What a ridiculous story," Tim said, dropping the book to the ground.

"Is it?" The troll scratched his enormous belly and belched. "The way I see it, you're Vane and the sky is magic."

"You don't say."

"I *do* say. And the moral of the story is, you've got to be where you belong. Don't resist it or all is lost. You need to keep company with them who's your kind of folks. Them who understands magic."

"Demons, for instance?" Tim scoffed.

"Yes, indeedy!" Toll the Troll let out a whoop. "Now demons, they—"

"Shut up!" Tim shouted. "All my life people have been cramming fairy tales down my throat. Do this and you'll be happy. Do that and you'll have friends. Be a good little scaredy-cat frog, and someday you'll turn into a bloody prince!" Tim could feel energy filling him up. He held out his arms and energy crackled through them. He felt surrounded by magic and power.

"I don't want to live *your* rotten old fairy tales. I want to live my *own*!"

He unleashed the energy directly at the troll. The bridge snapped, the demon disintegrated, and a shimmering object began to slowly materialize in front of him.

"Another bridge," a little Tim gasped.

"Does this one have a troll, too?" another one asked.

"That wasn't a troll, you idiot," a third Tim snapped. "That was a demon."

"It looks like a very nice bridge, but where do

you suppose it goes?"

"To Molly, of course," another mini Tim replied. "Where else?"

"That's right," Tim said. "To Molly. And I'm doing this on my own." He waved a hand and *poof! poof! poof!* He was alone again.

Only one me, now.

He truly hoped one of him would be enough.

Chapter Eight

TIM STEPPED ACROSS THE new bridge—and into a bizarre scene. He found himself inside a bubblegum-pink dollhouse. In the dim, flickering firelight, he could see that Molly and Crimple had pinned a scrawny old lady to the floor by her earrings. Molly held a wicked pair of gardening shears.

"Molly, look!" Crimple cried.

Molly glanced up. "Tim!"

"Darn," Tim said. "You don't need rescuing at all, do you?"

Molly rolled her eyes. "Is that what you expected? To pop in here to save the day?" She handed the old woman's shears to Crimple. The movement made the crone wince. "You take care of Vuall," she instructed the narl. She turned to face Tim. "While I take care of Tim."

Tim gulped. He had thought she would be

happy to see him. Instead, her brown eyes flashed with fury.

"Listen," she snapped. "You're disappointed that you didn't get to play hero? Well, let me tell you something. A girl could get herself thoroughly . . . *pinkified* if she waited for you to ride to the rescue!"

"But, uh, Molly, I kind of—"

Molly cut him off. "I wish we were married," she said.

Huh? Has all the pink turned her brain to cotton candy? "Married?" he repeated stupidly.

"Yes. So I could divorce you!" Molly flung her hands into the air. "Do you have any idea what I've gone through? This place is run by demons. Demons!"

Tim backed up a few steps.

But Molly wasn't done yet. "And how did I get here?" she continued, now pacing restlessly. "Was I *wicked*? Did I make some sort of unholy alliance? No. I'm here because I was your girlfriend. That's why."

She stopped and gulped for air. Tim was pretty sure she hadn't taken a breath since she started yelling at him.

"Was?" Tim asked tentatively, as he realized what she had just said.

"That's right. *Was*," Molly snapped. "I've been

kidnapped and tea-partied and threatened and instructed. All because you said you were taking me on a picnic. Hah!"

As much as Molly's words stung, Tim knew he had to stay focused on what was most important—getting them all out of here alive. "Molly, let me take you home. And you can hate me somewhere safer, all right?"

Molly turned her back on Tim. *Wow. She's so angry she can't even look at me,* he thought, his heart suddenly feeling thick and heavy. Then he noticed her shoulders shaking slightly. Could she be . . . *crying*?

He was surprised. Molly O'Reilly didn't even cry the time she fell out of a tree when she was nine years old and broke her arm. For her to be crying now—well, that was big.

Not that he blamed her. She'd been through a lot, and what had she done to deserve any of it? Nothing—other than making the big mistake of liking him enough to be his girlfriend. She was smart to break up with him.

"You're right, Molly," Tim admitted sadly. "This magic thing—well, it can put people in danger. I didn't think that through. And I wouldn't ever want anything bad to happen to you because of me. I'd never forgive myself."

Molly turned and faced him, and Tim saw the

tears in her eyes. Without a word, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Kissed him!

Molly O'Reilly is kissing me! Tim was so stunned he just stood there, feeling Molly's warm mouth on his. Then he remembered himself and put his arms around her, too. He kissed her back, knocking his glasses askew as they bumped noses.

"Stop!" Vuall shrieked. "You beastly children! Stop that right now!"

"Be quiet, you old hag," Crimple ordered.

Vuall moaned, clutching her stomach. "They're spoiling everything." She collapsed completely, as if all her energy and strength were draining out of her. "Love can't exist here. This is a world of demons."

Tim pulled away from Molly. "Do you hear something?" he asked, still looking at Molly's sparkling brown eyes. The tears had vanished, and now all he saw was pure light shining from them.

Molly grinned. "I think the nasty old biddy objects."

"Let her," Tim said, smiling. "I object to *her*."

He felt a tug on his jeans leg. "Your Openership, look!" Crimple said. "Everything is all—it's all different now."

Tim gazed around the dollhouse. "Whoa," he murmured. Crimple was right. Bright sunlight streamed into the room, and all the surfaces sparkled. All the hard edges had vanished, replaced by curves, swirls, and hearts. Most astonishing were the flowers. They were everywhere—wreaths on the walls, huge bouquets in vases, and petals underfoot. The place smelled glorious.

"Crimple—check yourself out!" Tim exclaimed. The narl had sprouted flowers, too! Little buds had appeared on his shoulders, his feet had gone leafy, and the twigs on his head were now topped with colorful daisies.

Crimple giggled. "I wish Tanger were here," he said. "This is better than spring."

Tim felt as if he were standing inside a great big valentine. Only instead of being gross and icky, the way the pink dollhouse had seemed before, the place was now exuberant and happy.

Tim realized he still held Molly around her waist. He released her and stepped back, taking her hands. "Molly, don't you think we should get out of here?" Tim said.

"Why?" Molly asked.

"Oh, be serious, would you? We're in a demon's lair, remember?"

Molly laughed. "Are we? You could have

fooled me! I've never seen a place so beautiful."

Tim rubbed the back of his neck and grinned. "All right, all right. So it's not all that demonish in here at the moment," he admitted, "but I think Tanger is out there wandering around all on his own."

"Tanger is here?" Crimple cried. "He left the tree, too?"

"He came to help me look for you and Molly."

"Is he all right?"

"He was feeling fine the last time I saw him, though he wasn't as leafy as you." Tim blinked as he stared at Crimple. Not only had the twiggy little fellow sprouted lush greenery but he now also sported a pair of wings! "Crimple, what's happening to you?"

"I meant to ask *you* that." He craned his neck, trying to get a look at the wings on his back. "Nothing like this has ever happened in all of narldom." He scratched his now-mossy chin. "Not that I'm aware of, at any rate."

"But how . . . what changed?" Tim wondered.

Crimple cocked his head. "Is there a word for what you were doing?" he asked.

Tim blushed. "You mean, me and Molly? Just now?"

"Yes."

"We could tell you the words, I guess," Tim

said, "but I don't think any of them would really describe the feelings. If you know what I mean."

Crimple nodded. "Well, I think it was that whatever-it-was-ness that made all the flowers appear. And also gave me wings." Crimple's brow furrowed as he concentrated, then he jumped up, and within moments he was airborne.

"Look at Crimple!" Molly exclaimed. "He's flying!"

"Well, he does have wings," Tim pointed out.

Molly made a face. "Duh. It's just—they work! And he knows how to use them. Without having to learn."

"I suppose that's because he was meant to have them," Tim suggested.

Crimple fluttered around Tim's and Molly's heads. "Flying is splendiferous!" he exclaimed gleefully. "Decidedly deciduous. It feels as natural as spring following winter!"

Molly suddenly gasped and glanced around. "If we're here, and Crimple's up there, where's Vuall?"

Tim's heart thudded anxiously. She was right—they'd been so caught up in what was happening between them that they'd completely forgotten the old crone. Had she escaped? Was she out there somewhere plotting an attack?

"I think she might be over here, Opener,"

Crimple said, hovering over a coffin that had appeared in the ever-changing dollhouse. "But I can't be sure. Have a look and tell me what you think."

Tim couldn't imagine how Crimple couldn't identify a woman as distinctive-looking as Vuall. He crossed to the coffin with Molly beside him. Although it was gleaming white and covered with gorgeous roses, the coffin was an odd sight and seemed out of place in the transformed dollhouse. He held his breath, unsure of what to expect, and peered into the box.

A beautiful young woman lay in the satin-lined coffin. He could now see why Crimple was so confused. Tim only recognized the woman as Vuall because of her dress and long loopy earrings.

"How can it be?" Molly said. "After all the horrid things she did, she turns beautiful."

"Only after she died," Tim noted. "This must be who she was before she became the woman we met. This was what she was when she made the choice that put her on a path that led her here."

"I guess dealing with demons really takes a toll," Molly commented.

"Don't mention tolls," Tim said. "Maybe she isn't really dead. I wonder if we should try to wake her up." He scratched his head theatrically,

pretending to think hard. "I know there's a time-tested method for doing that in fairy tales. What was it again?"

Molly crossed her arms and smirked. "You wouldn't dare."

"Me? No, not me." He gave Molly a sly grin. "But *you* could kiss her."

Molly raised an eyebrow. "Tell me you're not serious."

"I'm not serious."

"You have this all backward," Molly complained. "*I'm* the girlfriend. I'm supposed to tease *you* mercilessly."

"I've decided to break as many stereotypes as I possibly can this week," Tim said.

"Home," Crimple interrupted. "We still have to figure out how to get home. And find Tanger."

"You're right, Crimple," Tim said. "We keep getting distracted." He gazed down again at the beautiful woman in the coffin. "I bet she would help us in this form."

"We don't need her," Molly declared. "We've been doing fine on our own."

Molly's confidence in him warmed Tim inside, as if hot chocolate ran through his veins. He took her hand. "We sure have."

"So now it's time we find Tanger."

"We?"

"We." Molly set her jaw.

Tim knew it was useless to argue with her once her mind was made up—as it obviously was—but he felt he had to at least protest a little. "It's not really safe for you, you know."

"Oh, like it's safe for you," she retorted. "Besides, you're not going to prop me up on some shelf like a stupid Lacey doll or trap me in a tower like a princess." She yanked her hand away from him and tapped his chest with her finger, underscoring her points. "I'm not going *anywhere*." Poke. "Until we've found *Tanger*." Poke. "And had a little *chat*." Poke. "With whoever it was who had me *dino-napped*." Double poke.

Tim grabbed her finger to make her stop poking him. "Chat with them? You're mad!"

"Tim, don't you get it?" she asked. "They're not going to leave us alone unless we give them a reason to."

Tim gazed into her serious eyes for a moment, then nodded. "You're right," he admitted. "You've become a target as much as I have. And unless we figure out why and stop them, neither of us will ever be safe."

Crimple flapped his wings and flew to the door. "So it's time to find Tanger, now, isn't it?" he asked.

"That's the very first thing we'll do," Tim

promised. "And we won't leave this world until we have him back again."

Reassured, Crimple's wings fluttered, and another tiny flower sprouted from his elbow.

Tim took Molly's hand and they left the dollhouse. As much as it had transformed inside, nothing had changed outside. There was still the dark forest to face and a lost friend to find.

Tim bent down and picked up a stone. "Time to try this old trick again," he said, scratching the letter *T* onto the smooth surface.

Chapter Nine

TANGER SAT IN A dark wood, his back pressed up against the trunk of a tree. *How ever did I wind up all alone?* he wondered. He was certain he had been transported with the Opener, so where was the Opener? Had Tim gone and lost himself? Humans did have a tendency to go in all directions at once, so it was quite possible that he and Tim had become separated. Tanger was definitely more of a one-place-at-a-time sort of creature.

Oh, who would have thought we'd ever stray so far from our places? He shivered a bit and rubbed his back against the bark. It was a comforting feeling, being up against a tree. It was the most familiar sight in the strange and murky landscape.

Tanger took stock of his surroundings. *Trees and mist, mist and trees. That's all that seems to be here.* There were a few howls here and there, of

course, but Tanger tried not to think about those.

"Demon Playland," Tanger muttered. "I never thought I'd live to see the day when I'd be in such a place." He tried to hope that all would be well, that he would be reunited with his dear friend Crimple, that they would return safe and sound to their lovely tree. Really, it was a dear thing, their tree. So leafy, so many thick roots to slide down, their little abode inside the trunk so cozy. A tree is solid, it can be counted on. Friends, too, for that matter.

So no matter how dark this place, no matter how ghostly and filled with apparitions the entire world seems to be, I will not give up. Even if he lost his own life by having wandered so far from his place, he'd stay put now, he would. *It is the smartest thing to do, or I'm a saucepan.* He tugged his twiggy knees up to his chest and wrapped his skinny arms around them. *Yes, I'll wait right here until Tim finds himself again.*

The demon Barbatos was not pleased. Far from it.

This is not going as planned, he thought as he stomped through the woods. His fishlike eyes narrowed in his round, bald head. There was a change in the air. *All that oozing happiness is making me queasy. And it is wreaking havoc on the*

environment. He snapped a blossom off a nearby rosebush and tossed it to the ground. *Things are actually blooming, for badness sake!*

His tiny teeth gnashed. *I must stop this before everything spins ridiculously out of control.*

"That blasted Molly O'Reilly!" he cursed. She had spoiled everything. She was preventing young master Tim from becoming master Timothy Hunter, the mage Barbatos adeptly manipulated. If this kept up, young Tim would never become bitter and twisted. He wouldn't go power mad. He wouldn't strike bargains with demons.

And that would never do.

Barbatos tapped the tips of his blue fingers together, formulating a plan. *It all seemed to rest on that girl. I must separate them once and for all, create the event that sets him adrift, triggers the obsessions. But how?* This plan had to be clever, diabolical. Permanent.

This won't be simple, he realized. *If I put her in danger, I run the risk of fueling the flame of heroism and dashing derring-do in Tim.* Barbatos knew that a dramatic and romantic scenario could bring Tim and Molly even closer together—if such a thing were possible. *Besides,* he reminded himself, *she does have a pesky knack for rescuing herself.*

"Hmm," he rumbled. *Look to her for your*

answer, he told himself. *She's the problem—she will present the solution.*

Tanger was startled to see grass sprouting on the barren patch of ground in front of him. Gazing around, he noticed flowers bursting full grown from a nearby bush. *Spring certainly arrives all at once in these parts, he reckoned*.

Then, oh joy! Such a marvelous sight! Crimple! And not just any Crimple. A transformed Crimple! A flying, darting, swooping, lively, and *alive* Crimple! And Tim and Molly right along with him.

Tanger leaped to his feet and waved. "Crimple! Tim! Molly!" he shouted. "You've found yourselves!"

"Tanger! Look, it's Tanger!" Crimple swooped straight toward his twiggy friend, then hovered a few inches above him. "Tanger, I have wings!"

Tanger reached up and clasped Crimple's leafy hands. He was nearly lifted off his tiny feet by Crimple's fluttering movements. "Yes, I see. How marvelous!"

"Oh, you should have seen me. I was amazingly brave." He released Tanger's hands and darted and soared in front of his friend. He came to a stop and hovered again. "Especially when you consider how terrified I was."

"Oh, how I wish I could have been there!" Tanger said.

"We wished it, too!" Crimple landed on the ground in front of Tanger. "We wished it so much, indeed."

"Let me take a look at those things," Tanger instructed, using a scrawny finger to indicate that Crimple should turn around.

"Aren't they a pip?" Crimple twirled so that Tanger could take a closer look at the brand-new wings.

"It's so strange to see you with those," Tanger commented. He slapped his woody thigh and hooted. "The joke is on me!" he exclaimed. "This whole time I was worrying about you, afraid you'd be withering. And just look at you!"

"Oh, but I *was* withering!" Crimple protested. "I'd left my place, after all. And I was ever so worried I'd never see you again. And—" He dropped his voice to a lower register. "I was in constant danger of being *pruned*!"

"No!" Tanger gasped, his hands rushing to his cheeks in horror.

Crimple nodded. "Oh, yes. Yes indeedy do. But Molly and I faced down the old crone. You should have seen our Molly. She was marvelous."

"And silly you," Tanger scolded. "You ran away and refused to meet her when she first

arrived at our tree!"

Crimple hung his head in shame. "Don't I know it. What a silly splinter I was. And do you know, I would be sapless now, I believe, if Molly and the Opener hadn't . . . hadn't . . ." He seemed at a loss for words.

"Hadn't what?" Tanger asked, puzzled.

"Hadn't done *this*!" Crimple leaned forward and placed his lips on Tanger's cheek, making a smacking sound. He stepped back and looked at Tanger.

Tanger touched the spot Crimple had kissed. "What an interesting thing to do. It says hello in an entirely different way."

He continued tapping his cheek with his twiggy finger. "Perhaps that was what made the grass grow." Tanger pointed to the lush new lawn spreading out under them. "I noticed a sudden blooming. Quite unlike anything I have ever seen. And my old joints perked up a bit." He danced around Crimple, lifting his knees high. "Why, I feel like a sapling again!"

"I do believe you are right!" Crimple declared, clapping happily. "That is the precise and perfect explanation!" Crimple grabbed Tanger's hands, and they danced a merry little jig. Crimple fluttered a few inches above the ground, while Tanger took care not to be slapped by Crimple's new

wings. "Oh, yes, I do believe it is!"

Delighted, Tim watched the little narls' reunion. They were so happy to see each other. He was thrilled to think that something as simple and wonderful as a kiss could have had such an extraordinary impact on even *this* world. He grinned as he noticed Tanger starting to sprout in the same way Crimple had. Tim figured it was only a matter of time before Tanger also grew a pair of wings.

Tim took Molly's hand. "I'd say everything's just about taken care of here. We should go home."

"You're forgetting something," Molly said.

"Oh right." Tim sighed. "You want to take on the puffy pink dinosaurs. And whoever is in charge of them." He smiled sheepishly. "I was kind of hoping you had forgotten about the bad guys in light of all this good news." He gestured at the flowering landscape and the exuberant, now-leafy little narls.

"I don't think we can ever forget about the bad guys," Molly warned.

A loud thud behind him made Tim jump. His head whipped around as he scanned the area, trying to determine the source of the sound. He spotted something on the path.

"Where'd that book come from?" Tim said. A

thick book lay on the ground, looking completely out of place. Tim crossed to it, knelt down, and turned several pages.

"This is superweird," he commented. He turned to face Molly and the narls. "I've seen this book before. A troll made me read a story from it."

"What's it doing here?" Molly asked.

Tim stood up and gazed around. "I don't see the troll anywhere nearby, and, believe me, he'd be tough to miss."

"I doubt he'd leave his bridge," Tanger said. "They do like their tolls. Never known one to pass one up."

Tim didn't bother asking Tanger how he knew about the habits of trolls. The narls kept surprising him. Tim had learned to accept that. "But if that's true," Tim began, "how did—"

Before Tim could finish his sentence, the pages of the book flipped themselves open. Tim felt a powerful force pulling at him, dragging him toward the book that lay on the ground. A fierce wind whipped up, sending the narls flying, along with broken tree limbs, dust clods, and dust. He could barely see Molly as the sharp wind made tears spring into his eyes. And all the time, he could feel his body being dragged toward the book.

"Molly, run!" he shouted over the roaring whirlwind.

"No way!" she screamed back. "Not without you!"

Tim dug in his heels and leaned backward as hard as he could, desperately fighting against the gale. But it was no use. He was sucked into the book!

Barbatos stood in the bushes and smiled. *One down, one to go.* He chanted the incantations, and before Molly knew what was happening, he swept her into the book, too—though to a very different page.

The demon chuckled. This was the perfect plan—he was sure of it. Molly would drop Tim herself. Put an end to things. Certainly she would. *What girl wouldn't, when she discovers what is in store, who Tim would become? Yes. This will work quite satisfactorily.*

And now for the pièce de résistance. The ace in the hole. The sure thing. With a snap of his blue fingers, Barbatos brought himself to his own Timothy Hunter—all grown up but still decidedly childish, come to think of it.

Timothy cowered where Barbatos had left him, afraid to move, afraid the future that they had created together was woefully undone.

"Barbatos!" Timothy cried. "You're back. Is everything . . . taken care of?"

Barbatos took note of the sweat beaded on the magician's forehead. Good. He was in a particularly vulnerable state.

Barbatos bowed, hiding his smile. "Master, I have done what I can. But this future is still unstable, as you no doubt can sense. I will need your help for the next phase."

"*My* help! Why?"

"You are so much more powerful than I," Barbatos wheedled. "I believe I have discovered the solution. You must go to Molly while she is still a child, which is when all this started. But you cannot appear to her as you are now." Barbatos waved his hand up and down in front of Timothy, as if his human shape were an out-of-style suit.

"Yes, yes, of course, I'll need a disguise." Timothy stood and paced the room, biting his nails. "Why is that again?"

"She must see you as you truly are," Barbatos explained sweetly. "That is the test. If she sees you as you are, no matter your shape, you have ensured your future."

Before Timothy could annoy him with another question or anxiety attack, Barbatos said the words, made the gestures, and the magician was transformed into a fire-breathing dragon.

Barbatos swept him into the thick storybook

and slammed the covers shut. “Look alive, my little puppets,” he crooned, stroking the leather binding. “Have you memorized your lines? Are you prepared to utter clichés on cue?” He thumped the cover. “Lovely! Let’s cloud some little romantic minds. My princess. My knight. And my dragon.”

Chapter Ten

"WHERE AM I NOW?" Tim muttered. *There are way too many places inside of places these days.* He felt like one of those dolls that had another doll inside it, and then another and another.

With worlds, does it go on to infinity? he wondered. *How small are the inhabitants there? And do they know they're so tiny? And does having a world inside it tickle the host world?*

"Stop it!" he ordered himself. "Sheesh. Your speculations are goofier and more convoluted than anything those multiple mini Tims could have come up with!"

Stay focused. He let out a slow breath, trying to gather his thoughts. *Okay, so what just happened? Molly, Crimple, and I found Tanger. Things were looking up.* He sighed. *Then I stupidly had to go and check out the book. And now I'm in it!*

"Molly!" he called. "Where are you?"

No answer. *Maybe that's good,* he told himself. *Maybe that means she's with Tanger and Crimple and she's safe.* But Tim knew he was kidding himself. She would never stay safely somewhere if she thought he was in danger. Perhaps, she had been trapped by that whirlwind, too.

That means she might be here somewhere. And I just have to find her.

But where is *here?* Tim gazed around him. He was in another forest, but this one was lush and beautiful. A full moon hung low on the horizon, and he could hear birdcalls, chirping insects, and softly flowing water. This wasn't the strangely two-dimensional wood of the Demon Playland, where the color was flat and fear was in the air; this was total Technicolor—vibrant, a vision straight out of a movie.

"Or a fairy tale," Tim muttered. *Don't be fooled by how pretty and scenic and serene it all is,* he reminded himself. *Just because you've never seen so much green in one place before—other than in the world of Faerie—just because the world you come from is bleak and gray and angular, don't let that make you lose your edge. This is a trap, no matter how picturesque it might be.*

Now to find Molly. Tim set off down the path he found himself on. It seemed as good a place as any to start. He walked and walked and walked,

the fat moon never budging from its spot above the trees. Time didn't seem to pass, though the miles certainly did. Tim could tell he'd covered a lot of ground by the soreness of his feet.

Exhausted and hoarse from shouting, Tim came to a river. He was horribly thirsty, but he held back, gazing down at the inviting water. *If it's a magical place, I shouldn't eat or drink anything,* he warned himself. He licked his dry lips. *But if I don't, I'll die of thirst.*

Quit debating. You're as bad as those little mes! Just drink. He leaned over, washed his face, and drank. The water tasted great. Then he took off his sneakers and socks and soaked his feet. *Ahhh . . . that's the ticket.*

"Better fill the canteen," he muttered. Only when he grabbed the container somehow slung across his chest, he discovered it wasn't a canteen at all! It was a leather bag with a big gold *H* embossed on it. And then he remembered—he didn't have a canteen with him when he came to the Demon Playland! In fact, he didn't even own one!

Okay, this is new. Still, it will be handy to have some water with me.

Tim leaned over the river to fill the pouch. He hesitated as he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the bright moonlight.

"Huh?" He studied the reflection gazing back at him. His armor gleamed, and the visor of his helmet was pushed back, revealing his face. *Something looks wrong here. I know what it is! Those strange things covering my eyes.* He reached up—and the moment he touched the frames of his glasses, he flung himself away from the river.

"No!" he shouted. His heart pounded hard, and he had to work hard to calm down.

"That was close," he murmured. *I nearly believed I was a real knight. The clunky metal shirt I'm wearing and the sword hanging on my side—none of that caught my attention. It was my* glasses *that looked weird to me. My stupid, geekoid glasses that I've been wearing since I was in nappies, practically. The one thing about my appearance that is real is the one thing I thought was wrong. That is* not *good.*

No wonder I am so darn tired, Tim thought. *This armor must weigh a ton!*

Tim ran his fingers over and over the frames of his glasses, forcing himself to feel their solidity, their familiarity, their reality.

He sat back up slowly and discovered that he was no longer wearing the armor. He was back in his usual uniform of jeans, sneakers, T-shirt, and sweatshirt.

So these glasses are the key to my remembering

to stay me. He let out a sharp laugh. *All those years I've hated having to wear these crummy glasses and they wind up saving me from delusions of knightliness.*

Somehow it reminded Tim of what Tanger had said, just after he'd left his tree. *Stuff about places and belonging. About having to do certain things to convince the world that you belonged in it. That's what's happening here,* he realized. *This world wants me to belong in it. Probably to trap me here forever. So it's trying to make me fit in.*

He looked around. *This book I've fallen into has brought me to a magical wood, where I'm trying to find my missing girlfriend. That could easily be the start of a fairy tale. So it stands to reason it wants to dress me up as a knight in shining armor.*

Tim snorted. *As if.* He could just hear Molly hoot at *that* idea.

Okay, he told himself. *I don't think this place can change me as long as I remember to resist it. But just to be sure . . .*

He rummaged around in his pockets and found a pen. He held the cap between his teeth and wrote on his hand:

I am not prince anybody.

Satisfied by his precautionary measures, he recapped the pen and shoved it back into his pocket. He looked around blankly. *Now what?*

I read somewhere that people who are lost tend to wind up running around in circles. But I have a new theory. When you don't know where you are, it doesn't matter whether you travel in circles, straight lines, or zigzags. You just can't get anywhere.

Careful, Hunter, he admonished himself. *You're falling into thinking that this is your average, everyday case of being lost in the woods.* He knew he would have to keep reminding himself that he was in a bloody book. It was clear that this place didn't want him to remember that.

And it could succeed in keeping me from finding Molly, he knew. His brow furrowed. *But if that's the goal,* Tim thought, *then why would both of us have been brought here? There must be some plan I'm not seeing yet.* Tim realized he might have to play along with whatever this world had in store for him in order to find out exactly what that plan was. *Hopefully that will help me figure out how to find Molly if she's here, too.*

Tim decided to stay put. Since he had no clue as to where Molly was, it seemed to make the most sense. He sat back and waited to see what other tricks this fairy-tale world had up its sleeve. *Of course, worlds don't* have *sleeves.* Tim laughed at the image.

Come on, do your stuff, he thought. *The more you mess with me, the more clear your nasty old plan*

will become. Although he felt more confident now that he had something resembling a strategy, he made sure to keep his expression somewhat baffled. *Shouldn't be too hard,* he figured, *seeing as that's my usual state of affairs.*

He tapped his glasses again. "And as long as I have these," he murmured, "I should be able to remember my real place."

Something swooped past Tim's head, making him duck, its passage ruffling Tim's brown hair. It landed on a low branch of a nearby tree. Tim's hands balled into fists when he realized what it was.

An owl.

How obvious, Tim thought. *They've sent a replica of my owl, Yo-yo.* Tim had to fight to smother his rising anger. How dare they use Yo-yo to trick him? How stupid did they think he was? *If Yo-yo hasn't returned to me in my own world, why would I think he'd show up here?*

The owl cocked its head and blinked its yellow eyes slowly.

Remember your plan, Tim told himself. *Play along. They sent this . . . fraud for a reason. Stay on your toes and try to find out why.*

Tim stood up. "Oh, look, look," he recited. "An owl." His voice dripped sarcasm, and the flatness of his delivery echoed around him. *You can do*

better than that, he admonished himself. *Try harder.*

He cleared his throat and spoke again. "I wonder if it can truly be my old friend Yo-yo. My very first magic. Oh, I do hope so."

Better, he critiqued, but he found it difficult to keep the disdain out of his voice. It irked him to think they believed he was so gullible. He'd show them. Maybe it was foolish, but he couldn't stand the idea that "they" thought "they" could pull something over on him—something this transparent.

He continued talking to the owl, waiting for an indication of what this game was really all about. "Oh, Mister Owl, please be my friend Yo-yo," Tim wheedled. "I am so stupid that I will believe that you are Yo-yo if you will only give me a sign."

The owl flapped its wings and ruffled its feathers. *"Hoo!"* it hooted.

Tim rolled his eyes. "Oh, brother," he muttered. *Even I'm a better actor than this replica. If they aren't going to make much of an effort, then neither will I.* "Yo-yo, it's you," he recited flatly. "Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah. You will help me find Princess Molly, won't you, dear faithful owl?"

The owl flew straight at Tim. "Yah!" Tim yelped, throwing his hands up to protect his face. The attack caught him totally unprepared.

Tim batted at it, but it kept coming, its powerful wings slapping his face.

"Hey, get off me, you fake!" Tim hollered.

Their struggle knocked Tim's glasses to the ground. The owl swooped down, snatched them up in its talons, and flew away.

Tim gingerly touched the scratches on his face. He squinted at the blood on his fingers. *Bloody hell. It tried to kill me.* Then he realized—the glasses. They were gone. That was why the owl appeared—that was its game: to take his glasses away from him. The last link to his own reality.

"Oh, this is so not good," Tim moaned.

Chapter Eleven

"PLEASE, PRINCESS," THE LARGE dragon begged Molly. "Come admire my hoard for a while and let me admire you."

"I've told you before, you great dolt," Molly snapped. "My name isn't Princess, and I'm not responding to any remarks including that loathsome title."

She sat with her back to the huge beast, huddled in a corner of the strange cave that the book had sucked her into. *I guess that stupid dollhouse wasn't torturous enough,* Molly thought. The enormous dragon stood between her and the cave entrance, but Molly had already discovered that outside was a sheer drop of about a thousand feet. She wasn't going anywhere, not just yet, anyway.

Molly couldn't figure out why she wasn't afraid of the gigantic dragon. He was a creature straight out of a fairy tale or a movie, complete

with scales, wings, large teeth, sharp claws, and smoke coming out of his nostrils. Maybe it was the fairy tale-ness of it all. More likely it was because he was so disgustingly solicitous. He was practically slavering to do her bidding. *Gross.* He was more annoying than scary. His obvious devotion to her confused her even more. Had she been brought to this weird world to be mooned over by an obsessed monster? It's not like he was doing anything to actually harm her. Still, it was creepy, and she figured the best thing she could do was to not give in and torture him right back!

She glanced behind her. Yup, he was still there, gazing at her with big, dumb cow eyes. He loomed over a towering mountain of treasure: gold coins, jewelry, boxes of more jewelry, crowns, tiaras—anything a fairy-tale dragon might be protecting. He wanted her to be impressed by his hoard. *Hah!* She didn't care about any of that junk. Give her a good pair of work boots like the ones she was wearing, a CD player, and a soccer ball, and she was happy. Also Tim. Tim made her happy, too.

Tim was out there somewhere, Molly figured. He got sucked into this nightmare of a fairy-tale farce, too.

The question is, who is supposed to rescue whom? Molly wondered. *I'm the one trapped in a*

cave with a dragon, but Tim can really be clueless sometimes.

Molly thought of the times in the past when she had to stick up for Tim at recess so Bobby Saunders would back down. Not that she would ever remind Tim of that. But it did make her question what she should do. The dragon might be acting all sweet and servile with her now, but that snout of his came equipped with major fire action. The creature just might use it on Tim if he tried to get her out of there.

She slowly wiggled herself around so that she faced her scaly host. *Tim wanted me to meet some interesting types,* she thought. *Well, I've met the narls, some demons, some dinos, and now a dragon. I really hope that's it on my social calendar for the day.*

The dragon's shoulders were slumped, if a dragon could be said to have shoulders. Then he noticed that she no longer had her back to him. His eyes brightened. "As you please, then, prin—er, Molly. I'll try to keep that in mind in the future. The last thing I want is to distress you, fair—"

Molly cut him off. "Don't call me damsel, either. Or lady or maiden," she warned, "unless you want me to start throwing your precious treasure off the cliff."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, prin—

Molly," the dragon said hastily. His long, heavy tail flicked over his pile, resting protectively on top of it.

Molly smirked. *That's useful to know,* she thought. *He loves his glittering doodads enough to do as I say. This bit of info may come in handy.*

"I must say, you are looking lovely," the dragon said. "Perhaps you'd care to change out of those scruffy clothes you're wearing?"

Molly stood up and crossed her arms over her chest. She planted herself a few feet away from the dragon's snout. "I like my clothes," she declared. "You got a problem with that?"

"Why, of course not," the dragon replied. "Anything that makes you happy makes me happy." He used his short front legs to rummage through his treasure collection. He opened a trunk and pulled out a sparkling white gown covered with lace, pastel ribbons streaming from its puffy sleeves. Tiny flowers were embroidered around the neckline. "But look. Isn't this dress pretty?"

Molly gazed up at the cave roof in exasperation. "Are those ears of yours just for decoration? Didn't you hear what I just said?"

"Of course I heard you, prin—Molly. But the dress is so lovely, so perfect. So *you*." He dangled the dress from his talons inches from Molly.

Molly smacked the dress away, knocking it to the floor. "For the last time, get that awful gown away from me. Sheesh! Even a Lacey doll would be embarrassed to wear that poofy thing."

"Molly, I'm worried about you. You simply aren't yourself."

"How would you know?" Molly snapped. "You only just met me."

Now the dragon lay down and gazed at her sadly.

"Princess. Oh, my poor lost princess," he moaned. "How is it that we have grown so far apart? Please, won't you put on your gown? For me?" Tears welled up in his eyes. "For all we've meant to each other."

Molly was taken aback by the creature's emotions. "Oh, all right, if it means that much to you," she muttered. *Don't want to wind up drowning in a pool of dragon tears, after all.* She picked up the dress, then narrowed her eyes at the weepy dragon. "But only if you promise to tell me why you act like you know me."

Molly pulled the glittering dress on over her jeans and sweatshirt. At least the heavy work boots she wore gave her enough of a lift that she wouldn't be tripping over the hem of the long, flowing skirt.

Molly was surprised to find the dress had a

zipper, but it did. The moment she zipped it up, she felt a strange change come over her. She turned around to face the dragon.

"Molly, you look so beautiful," the dragon exclaimed.

"Fie, sir," Molly said. "A captive I may be, but I will not be spoken to with such wanton disrespect. You will address me as princess. Though I'd sooner you spoke to me not at all, other than to fulfill your promise."

She fought the falseness growing inside her, fought it with all her might. She refused to let the power of this fairy-tale costume get the better of her, despite the fact that she now radiated with a pale pink glow.

"Yes, princess," the dragon said.

So spill all, she wanted to say. But the words that came out of her mouth were quite different. "Sir, we have entered into an exchange. I have fulfilled my part." She smoothed the ruffles on the layered skirt. "Now you must fulfill yours, or you are no gentleman. Tell me the reason you address me with such familiarity. How could you possibly know me?"

This is weird, Molly thought, *but as long as the meaning is basically the same, I guess I don't care that my words come out all fancy. I have to be careful, though. This place has major mind-twisting power.*

"I can't blame you for not remembering, princess," the dragon said. "You probably don't want to. I was so cruel to so many of you. And for so long."

So many of me? Okay, this is one psycho dragon. How many of me does he think there are? Stay on your toes, O'Reilly.

"When did we meet, if meet at all we did?"

"It was in the past," the dragon explained. "Well, actually, *my* past, *your* future. Let me see. . . . I gave the first version of you to Vuall when you were nearly seventeen."

"Vuall?" Hearing the name of the horrible old crone made Molly's skin tingle. *Vuall was trying to train me to be a proper wife for some powerful magician. Could this dragon be working for the same magical guy? Is that why I'm here? Have I been kidnapped again for that old creep?*

"The most recent Molly I tried to train when she was about twenty-six or so," the dragon continued.

"The first Molly? The most recent Molly?" Molly shook her head. "None of this makes any sense, knave."

"No, I suppose it doesn't," the dragon agreed sadly. "Though it did at the time. Perhaps it all still can."

Molly gazed into the dragon's huge eyes and

shuddered. The more he spoke, the more familiar he seemed, and the more danger she knew she was in.

Tim stumbled through the forest, tying to get around without his glasses. At least he knew where he was going now. He had spotted a castle looming above him, high atop a mountain. *If this world wants me to be a knight, and I'm trying to find a girl, stands to reason that she'd be stuck up there in that castle.*

The landscape had changed around him, as if it were helping him to his destination. It worried him a bit: If the world wanted him to get to the castle, then he was playing right into its evil plans. But if that was the only way to find Molly, then so be it. He'd figure a way out of all this once they were back together.

He reached the bottom of the mountain. He nearly had to bend over backward to see the top of it. Wispy clouds obscured most of the castle, but he could still make out the turrets, poking out of the mist.

"I guess there's no elevator," he muttered. He was glad the suit of armor had vanished—he wouldn't want to have to climb this mountain lugging around all that extra weight.

"Well, no sense dawdling." He reached up and

gripped a rock sticking out of the side of the mountain. "That's strange," he said. The mountain didn't feel quite real. He tapped several spots. "It's hollow!" He stepped back again. "It's like a huge arts-and-crafts project. Papier-mâché or Styrofoam or something. It's just an enormous stage set." *All the better for us to act out our parts, I suppose.*

He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "Better get going," he told himself. "Just because it's fake, that doesn't make it any easier to climb." Or less high.

Tim grabbed a handhold again, lifted his foot, shoved it into a crevice, and pulled himself up. He reached up, feeling around for another rock or branch to grab. Without his glasses, the surface above him was hard to see, making it difficult to look for secure grips. He'd have to do it all by feel.

Lucky for you losing your glasses hasn't hurt your sense of touch. He pressed himself against the mountain and slid his leg up until his foot found a spot to step onto. Pushing with his foot, he raised himself another few inches.

"Man," he muttered, grabbing a thick branch jutting out of the mountain and pulling himself up again. "This is going to take forever."

As he slid against the mountain, inching up its side, the surface felt papery. For a moment he

worried that it wouldn't hold his weight. But a few more steps up, and he decided the fake scenery was sturdy enough.

Reach, grab, pull, up. Reach, grab, pull, up. Over and over Tim repeated the actions. Sweat made his T-shirt cling to his back and plastered his hair to his forehead. His arms strained, his muscles ached. *I really hope Molly is up there,* he thought, gritting his teeth as pebbles scraped and chafed his hands. *I'd hate to think I'm getting all this physical exercise for no good reason. That would be like volunteering for extra gym classes.*

His foot slipped out from under him, and he clutched the mountain. His misstep sent rocks and pebbles raining down. He squeezed his eyes shut and took a few deep breaths, forcing his heart to slow down. It was nerve-racking work, having to climb by feel.

Once he felt calmer, he started moving again.

"Come on, you handholds," he muttered. "I know you're there."

"Help!" came a voice above him.

Tim's heart pounded. *That sounds like Molly!* He yanked himself up and over a jutting ledge. He had come to a place where he could actually stand up, just below the top of the mountain. From where he stood, he could see the courtyard of the castle. The bright moonlight illuminated a shocking sight:

Molly, wearing a long, fancy dress, facing an enormous, winged dragon.

How am I going to fight this creature? Tim wondered. *Maybe I should have kept that armor—or at least the sword that came with it.*

"I'll just have to find a way," he declared. "Molly!" he called. "Molly, I'm here!"

He saw Molly's head turn in the direction of his voice. "Oh, Timothy, at last you've come!" she cried. "To arms, my prince! Save me!"

Tim blinked a few times. *Why is Molly talking so funny? It must be some sort of spell,* he figured. *Just like this place tried to make me think I was a knight, it must be making her talk like a fairy-tale princess.*

The dragon roared and sent a fiery blast from its nostrils and mouth. "At last, fair one," it rumbled. "You are now mine." It towered over Molly.

She shrank back from it. "Eeek!" Molly squeaked.

"Eeek?" Tim repeated. He had never heard a sound like that come out of her. He'd heard her holler, yell, shriek, cheer, shout, guffaw even. But squeak? Never.

"You have no champion to defend you," the dragon rumbled. "You are at my mercy."

Molly threw the back of her hand over her

forehead. "Ooooh," she moaned in a singsong voice. She swooned and collapsed into the dragon's clutches.

"Oooooh?" Even in an enchanted world, Tim didn't think Molly was the type of girl to swoon. No way, no how. *It's all so phony,* he realized, dismissing it in disgust. *Just playacting, and badly at that. Like this dumb mountain.*

"All right, that's it," he declared.

He stood at the edge of the ledge and addressed the vast night. He knew whoever was running this little puppet show must be around somewhere, just waiting for him to take the bait. Not a chance.

"Once upon a time," Tim announced. "There lived a kid who could tell the difference between his girlfriend and a doll. And he knew that he knew it!" He whirled and pointed at the puppet Molly in the dragon's arms. "And that's not her! The end."

An enormous cracking sound shattered the silence, like a clap of thunder. Tim was knocked off his feet as the entire mountain convulsed. Even the dark sky seemed to be shaking, rattling the stars right out of it.

Tim covered his head as cardboard trees, patches of midnight blue sky, papier-mâché rocks, and pieces of a rubber dragon rained down on him.

Then Tim heard a screeching, and now the metal structure that had held up the entire landscape twisted, bent, and shattered. He was knocked to the ground, and he could feel pieces of the world piling up on top of him.

Eventually the horrific cacophony of destruction subsided.

Slowly, Tim eased himself out from under the rubble. He carefully checked to be sure he was okay. *I seem to still be in working order,* he thought. *Banged up and bruised, maybe, but not broken.*

Tim's heart pounded as he gazed at the ruined surroundings. The castle had vanished and so had the mountain. All that he could see was pieces of metal, pieces of canvas, pieces of pillars, scaffolding, girders.

Hang on. That's not all that's here. Tim spotted a tiny blue figure dart out from behind a pile of twisted cable and dash into an opening between two smashed sheets of steel.

Without even thinking, Tim's hand shot out. "Stop!" he shouted. "Get back here!"

Energy tingled through his arm, and he could actually see what looked like glowing ropes flick out from the tips of his fingers. These magically charged cords sought out the small blue creature, wrapped themselves around him, and dragged him out into the open.

"Why, young Timothy, it is *so* good to see you," the creature gushed.

Tim stared at the small, bald, potbellied blue guy. He looked like an overgrown baby. A blue one, at any rate.

"Ah, young master to be, how can your future servant Barbatos be of service?"

"You can tell me where Molly is," Tim said. "And cut that 'master' junk."

"Molly?" Barbatos said. "Oh, do you mean that lovely young lady who was sucked into the book with us, too?"

"You know exactly who I'm talking about," Tim snapped. His flash of anger made the magical cords imprisoning Barbatos squeeze tighter.

"Oof," Barbatos grunted. "I can't answer you if I can't get enough air to breathe." He gasped.

Tim took a deep breath, calming himself, and saw that as he did, the cords loosened a bit.

"Don't play with me," Tim warned. "You can see what I can do. Now answer me. Where is the real Molly?"

"Why, future master, isn't it obvious?" Barbatos gave Tim a chilling, innocent smile. He waved a pudgy hand at the ruined junk heap of a landscape. "She's under all that. Somewhere."

Stunned, Tim stumbled backward. *Have I killed Molly?* He sank to his knees and gazed out

across the shattered world. He didn't even care when he let go of the magical cords and Barbatos escaped. All he could think of was finding Molly—finding her alive!

Chapter Twelve

MOLLY'S HEAD HURT, AND her whole body ached. She lay flat on the ground and could feel a bump forming on her forehead.

What just happened? Molly wondered. *The whole world fell apart.*

She felt groggy and decided maybe she should just lie there for a while. *If the world is broken, it's not like there's any rush to get anywhere. And there's something heavy sitting on my legs. I'm too tired to move it off. I'll do it later.*

"Princess, please wake up," she heard someone pleading. "Wake up, princess, dear. I can't magic properly in this shape and I can't hold this mountain up much longer."

Princess? Oh, that's right. I'm a princess. And I'm in a dragon's lair. I remember now. "Oof," she moaned. It was coming back to her. *There was a booming noise, and the roof of the cave fell in. I must*

have been knocked on the head. In that case, she realized, *I better try to wake myself up.*

Slowly, carefully, she moved her legs, knocking the pieces of metal off. Then she cautiously began to pull herself into a sitting position. She noticed the entrance to the cave had been completely blocked by debris.

"I'm sorry that I tried to keep you again," the dragon said. "I know I should have let you go, Molly. If I had, you never would have been hurt like this."

Molly held her throbbing head. She ran her hand over the growing lump. *That's going to be a beaut,* she thought.

Her eyes finally focused on the dragon. Her mouth dropped open. He seemed to be holding up what was left of the cave, his dragon strength the only thing keeping it from crushing them.

"Your power and bravery have saved us, I see," Molly said, still speaking in that odd, fairy tale way. "But how long can you protect us from the final blows, dragon?"

"Not much longer," the dragon confessed.

"Then, dragon, we must find a means of survival."

"Princess, might I ask one small favor of you?"

Molly could see him straining to keep the roof from caving in on them. "In light of your honorable actions, I will try to grant you a boon. Ask."

"I wonder if you'd mind calling me by my real name. Call me Timothy or Tim or even Mr. Hunter, if you'd rather be formal. Anything but 'dragon.'"

Molly's blood ran cold. He couldn't have said his name was Tim Hunter. Not this dragon, this beast! But in her sinking heart, she suddenly knew it was true.

As Molly had these thoughts, her fairy-tale princess dress dissolved. "I've already got a Tim, buddy," she said, her voice sounding like her own again. "And you aren't him. I'll stick with 'dragon,' okay?"

She rummaged around for something to help the dragon brace the roof with, avoiding his hurt—and frighteningly familiar—eyes. "Here," she said, shoving a steel column into a pile of rubble and jamming it into a somewhat solid section of the roof. "This should help hold up that area, so you don't have to take the whole weight."

"Thank you, Molly," the dragon said. She could hear pain in his voice. *How can I be feeling sorry for a dragon?* she asked herself. Foolish or not, though, she did.

She turned to face him squarely. "Look, I know you think you're Timothy Hunter. But couldn't that be part of the fairy tale? You know, like me thinking I was a princess after I put on that stupid dress. This whole world is all just one big game of pretend!"

"No, Molly," the dragon replied gravely. "The only pretending I'm doing now is pretending to be a dragon."

"B-b-b-but how—" Molly sputtered, so distraught she couldn't even finish her question.

"I am a version of a Tim that he could grow up to be," the dragon explained. "The Tim who uses his magic for power, for glory, for selfish reasons. I am the Tim who mingles with demons, does their bidding as they do mine. I feed on anger and war. Now I know why I am in this form—this dragon is a true representation of my soul."

Molly sat down hard. Her legs wouldn't hold her up anymore. "You are what Tim will be when he grows up?" she said softly. "Oh, no," she moaned, her stomach tightening. Her breath came in sharp gasps as she choked out, "It's you. *You* are the grown-up magician Vuall was training me for."

"Yes," the dragon admitted. "I see now that was wrong."

"You said it yourself," she said, the horror of it making her feel trapped and panicky. "You created lots of different versions of me, because you wanted me to be different from who I really am."

"I should have left you as you are," the dragon said.

Molly shut her eyes, trying to think, trying to understand, trying to make it not true. "And you are the future," she stated flatly. "Tim's future. My future."

"Maybe."

Is he trying to make me insane? She opened her eyes, tears streaking down her face. "Maybe? What do you mean, maybe?"

"The way my demon Barbatos explains it, I am what your Tim will become if certain things do—or *don't* happen."

Molly's shallow breaths came more rapidly, but her heart now speeded up with hope rather than fear. Could she stop all this from happening? "What things?" she demanded.

"I don't know," the dragon said.

Molly slowly rose to her feet. "You tell me," she said. She strode toward him. "You tell me the truth or I swear I will knock out this brace and make sure neither one of us gets out of this fairy tale alive."

"No!" the dragon cried. "I couldn't bear to see you come to harm. I truly don't know what events take place to get me here. I—I sold my memories."

Molly stopped midstep. "You did *what*?"

"I sold my memories to the demon Barbatos in exchange for power. I don't know what happened to me between the ages of thirteen and thirty. I don't know what decisions or choices I made. I do know that I have a lot of power, or so Barbatos is always telling me."

Molly covered her face with her hands and shuddered. "Oh, Tim," she murmured. "Tim."

"Now I want you to stand away from me," the dragon instructed. "I can't hold the roof up any longer. There is only one way to keep the world from crushing you, and I don't want you to get hurt when I do this."

Numb, Molly did as she was told. She backed up as far away as she could from the dragon, wondering what on earth was going to happen next.

Her eyes widened as a tiny blue creature materialized in the cave. She blinked, recognizing him from somewhere. "You!" she shouted, pointing at him. "You were the one who had me kidnapped by the pink dinosaurs."

Barbatos ignored her outburst. He planted

himself in front of the dragon. "Don't do this!" he begged. "Oh, master, it's not worth it. You'll destroy all we've worked so hard for."

"Get away from me, Barbatos," the dragon roared. "I must save Molly and this is the only way."

"No!" Barbatos screeched.

Timothy Hunter, dragon, reared back his head and blasted the roof with flames. Molly buried herself in the rubble, trying to escape the searing heat. Over and over, the dragon shot flames. The smell of melting metal and soot and ash was overwhelming.

Molly heard a loud thud and felt the ground beneath her shake. She peeked out from her hiding place, and gasped.

The dragon had saved her. He had burned away the roof, so that nothing could crash down on her, and now she'd be able to climb over the debris to get down the side of the mountain. But he had incinerated himself in the process. His lifeless, singed body lay in the center of the cave.

Barbatos stood over the dead dragon. As he noticed Molly moving, he focused all his fury on her. "This is all your fault," he growled. "He was almost evil all the way through. But you brought

out a soft spot in him. This isn't over yet, girly."

Before Molly could reply, Barbatos snapped his fingers and vanished.

Chapter Thirteen

"FIRE!" TIM CRIED. "I bet that's Molly sending up a flare!" Tim didn't bother to worry about where she might have found something like that here; he just wanted some reason to hope she was alive. He raced to the spot where he had seen the enormous flames.

Once the fire stopped, he followed the scent of smoke up the side of a large mountain of debris. He found a smoldering, dead dragon, with Molly kneeling beside it.

"Molly!" he exclaimed. "Molly, is it really you?"

She looked up at the sound of his voice, and even without his glasses he could see that she'd been crying. "Oh, Molly, of course it's you," he murmured, hurrying to her side.

He knelt down beside her and held her close. "Everything is all right now," Tim told her.

After a few moments, she seemed calmer, and he helped her to her feet. He eyed the dragon. "You know, it's not so great for a bloke's ego if he keeps showing up just *after* you've managed to rescue yourself. I see you got rid of the dragon without any help from me at all."

Molly shuddered. "I just want to go home, Tim."

Tim's forehead furrowed. No banter? No quip? She was even more shook up than he realized. "Okay, Molly," he said softly. "We'll go home."

She rubbed her face, spreading soot where tears had been.

He pulled the Opening Stone from his pocket. "Take us home," he commanded. Nothing. He stared down at it. It didn't even glow the way it always did at home.

"What do you think is wrong with it?" Molly asked.

Tim shrugged. "Maybe it won't work here because this is an artificial world created by a demon."

"Now what?" Molly asked.

Tim scratched his head. "I don't know. I've never tried to get out of a book before." He bit his lip, thinking. "Wait, I have an idea. There was this demon—I had him in my power before. I bet I can do it again and force him to get us home."

A look of horror spread across Molly's face. "No! Don't do that." She backed away from him.

"But, Molly—"

She cut him off. "Tim, do you care for me?" She took his hands in hers. They were ice cold. "I mean, really, really care for me?"

"What kind of question is that?" Tim replied. "You know I do."

"Then you have to promise me something. Will you swear . . . swear by your name for me?"

Tim was startled by her vehemence. "By my *name*?" He had once explained the power of names to her, so he knew this was no casual phrasing on her part.

"Yes, by your name," she said.

"What do you want me to swear?" he asked.

"You must promise me that you won't say another word to demons. Or listen to them. Or do trades with them. Ever. Just leave Barbatos alone. Leave him here in this dumb fairy tale like the nightmare that he is."

"B-but how will we get home?" he asked.

"This is more important than getting out of here. You're swearing right now. Or you and I are through. Forever."

Tim grinned. "Oh, right. It is about time for us to break up again, isn't it?"

"This isn't a joke," Molly said. "I'm not teasing.

I mean it this time."

Tim studied her face. He could tell something had happened to her, something big, and it was making her ask for this. "Uh, Molly, do you know something I don't know?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Aren't you going to tell me what it is?" he asked softly.

"I don't think I can," she said in a voice full of heartbreak.

Tim stroked her sooty face gently, brushing her hair back. "Well, you've trusted me when it was probably stupid to do so. I know I can trust you, too. All right, I swear by my name."

Molly took in a deep, shaky breath. "Thank you."

Tim pulled her to him. "Better?" he asked.

Molly smiled up at him, her eyes still sad. "Much."

"One thing, though," Tim said, slinging his arm across her shoulders. "No demons, no answers on how to get out of this fairy tale."

Molly smirked, looking once again like the girl he knew. "Oh, Tim," she said in a taunting tone. "Isn't it obvious?"

He took a step back and narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Obvious to whom?"

Molly laughed, and he felt instantly better.

"We want this little adventure to end, right?"

Tim nodded.

"This is a fairy tale. And how do fairy tales end?"

Tim smacked his forehead. "Of course. You're right. It *is* obvious. How do you put up with my stupidity?"

Molly rolled her eyes. "It is quite a burden, you know."

Tim took her hand again. "All good fairy tales end with a happily ever after."

"A happy ending," Molly agreed.

Barbatos materialized in front of them. "Don't, young Timothy," he cautioned. "You're making the worst mistake of your life. I can help you! You need me!"

"I swore by my name to have nothing to do with demons," Tim said, his eyes never leaving Molly's. "I think what I'm about to do should take care of everything just fine."

He kissed Molly, and the false world melted away around them. When he took his lips from hers and opened his eyes, the first thing he noticed was that he could see clearly again.

"My glasses!" he exclaimed. "I have my glasses back!" He and Molly were standing under the narls' tree in the abandoned lot.

"Look! It's the Opener!" Tanger cried.

"And Molly! Welcome home!" Crimple added.

"Wow, look at you two!" Molly said. The two little narls fluttered around them. The once-twiggy creatures were now covered in flowers, and each sported translucent wings.

"You see," Tim said. "Leaving your place didn't make you die after all."

"Why, you're right!" Tanger said. "We seem to still be quite alive! Or I'm a saucepan!"

"In fact, leaving our place turned out to be just the thing for wing growing," Crimple added.

"You might even say, going on an adventure with you, Opener, opened up a whole new world to us," Tanger said.

"That must be why you're called the Opener!" Crimple concluded.

Tim grinned. "Could be," he said, taking Molly's warm hand in his. "Could be."

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Adobe Acrobat eBook Reader August 2006 ISBN 0-06-123765-5

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Timothy Hunter and *The Books of Magic* created by Neil Gaiman and John Bolton.

The Books of Magic: Lost Places was primarily adapted from the story serialized in *The Books of Magic: Reckonings,* originally published by Vertigo, an imprint of DC Comics, © 1997.

The Books of Magic: Reckonings comic books were created by the following people:

Written by John Ney Reiber
Illustrated by Peter Snejbjerg, Peter Gross, and John Ridgway.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Jablonski, Carla.
Lost Places / Carla Jablonski ; created by Neil Gaiman and John Bolton.— 1st Eos ed.
p. cm. — (The books of magic ; #5.)
"Timothy Hunter and The Books of Magic created by Neil Gaiman and John Bolton. The Books of Magic: Lost Places was primarily adapted from the story serialized in The Books of Magic: Reckonings, originally published by Vertigo, an imprint of DC Comics, 1997."
Summary: The adventures of young magician Timothy Hunter continue when his girlfriend Molly is abducted to the Demon Playland, and both face unusual dangers as they struggle to escape back to their own world.
ISBN 0-06-447383-X (pbk.)

About the Publisher

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